THE KEYS OF THE CITY

by ELMER DAVIS

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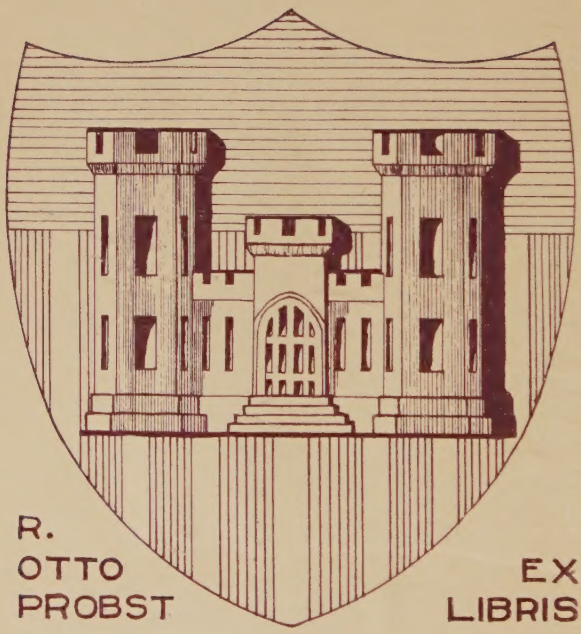

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NOVELS BY ELMER DAVIS

TIMES HAVE CHANGED
I'LL SHOW YOU THE TOWN
THE KEYS OF THE CITY

THE KEYS OF THE CITY

BY

ELMER DAVIS

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THE KEYS OF THE CITY

I.

Opening Chorus: in Which One Voice Sings Out of Tune.

THE hot hazy August day on which Nick Rexford arrived in Hollisburg, Indiana, was to be the decisive day in the history of Nick Rexford and of several other persons, and a turning-point of considerable importance in the history of Hollisburg. Appropriately, it was a day of celebration, of festal display. Tricolored bunting swathed the cluster lights along the bricked blocks of Main Street. Big flags hung from the store fronts, little flags drooped from the dusty automobiles parked in long rows down the side streets; tiny flags fluttered in the hat bands of members of the Chamber of Commerce who assembled around the melodiously tooting brass band, beneath the long streamer that hung across Main Street with the legend, "Welcome to Hollisburg."

While members of the Chamber grouped in the opening ensemble the stars lingered behind the scenes. In the great stucco house on the river front, set back in the midst of a whole city block of trim-clipped lawn, St. Elmo Pence, president of the bank and of the Chamber of Commerce, stood before his

full-length mirror and practiced the gestures that were to accompany the address of welcome. Here a lifted arm, there a sweeping outflung hand—then the grand final gesture, open hands extended before him, as he finished with a ringing "We present the keys of the city to our honored guest."

And in the old gray house at the top of the Elm Street Hill, Colonel Oliver Perry Morton Hollis, chairman of the reception committee, was putting on the shaggy silk hat and the frayed greenish Prince Albert coat that he had bought for the inauguration of Benjamin Harrison, and telling his daughter Ruth that there was going to be a banquet at the hotel, so she needn't have them get dinner.

Colonel Hollis never had to practice his gestures. It was years since the last servant had left the Hollis mansion, where wages were subject to a permanent moratorium. Ever since her mother died Ruth had done all the housework herself. But the Colonel had never acknowledged the descent from the heights; in his conversation "they" still did the work. And Ruth, who had to be a realist because she lived with a sentimentalist, merely reflected that if her father was dining downtown she could go out for some tennis and a swim at the Country Club. She had no interest in the presentation of the keys of the city to the honored guest.

But the welcome and the flags and the keys of the city were not for Nick Rexford. Nobody noticed him when he eventually trudged into town through the oily dust of the river road. The welcome was all for B. F. Crisler, who was to arrive from Chicago

at eleven forty-three; a welcome of which Mr. Crisler had no intimation and no desire. He had expected to slip into town without making or provoking much noise, for such little noise as was essential in his business he was accustomed to making himself, at the proper and much later time. He didn't know, when he wrote to the Pershing House to reserve a room, and got a letter of introduction from a Chicago bank to St. Elmo Pence, that Hollisburg had an up-and-coming Chamber of Commerce which made a point of doing things right for those who were worth it.

And a little investigation had disclosed that Mr. Crisler was worth it. He represented, it was understood, a syndicate of Chicago capitalists who were planning to build a sanitarium somewhere on the hills along Willow River; and when that news arrived the Chamber of Commerce held a pep meeting and vowed that it would get that sanitarium for Hollisburg.

"Hustle with Hollisburg" was the motto of the Chamber of Commerce; and since St. Elmo Pence had started the habit of hustle, and made it pay, most people hustled with him. Colonel Hollis never hustled; no Hollis had, since the Mexican War. But an indolence excused in the bearer of his honored name was held more seriously against lesser heretics, and the most notorious of these was Clay Sellers, the lawyer. Mr. Sellers's lack of interest in the proceedings of the day was not only obvious, but deliberately flung in the faces of the more respectable citizens. About the time Colonel Hollis was starting down-

town—that is to say, along toward ten o'clock—Clay Sellers was just finishing his breakfast at Dan Cullen's lunch counter on Main Street. At that hour, of course, he was alone except for Dan himself. He breakfasted with intense deliberation; lit his corncob pipe; paused before the fly-specked mirror to arrange his few wisps of sandy hair across the shiny open spaces on the top of his head; stared out at beflagged Main Street; and gently murmured, "Hell!"

"Huh?" asked Dan Cullen, wiping his hands on a greasy apron.

"I said," explained Clay Sellers, removing his pipe with an air of mild protest, "that there is too much hustle in this town. Used to be a good place to live, Dan, when we were kids—back in the nineties. A man could take his time in those days and still have enough to eat. But then Pence came along with his hustle——"

"And put Hollisburg on the map," Cullen finished. "We all make more money now—even you. I hear George Blades' garage cleared a thousand dollars last month. Nobody'd 'a' done that twenty years ago."

"Twenty years ago," Sellers objected, "a man could go as far as he wanted in a horse and buggy and see just about as much. Blades gets rich by buying used cars cheap from people that never could afford them and selling them with a fresh coat of paint to suckers that think they're getting a bargain. Which, Daniel, is what is known as progress. That's what's the matter with this town. Too much progress—too much Blades—above all, too much Pence."

"You're sore because even you have to hustle some now. I tell you, Pence made this town."

"In his own image," Sellers agreed. "Get something new—no matter what it is. Everybody along Commerce Street had to move out when Pence brought the glue factory to town; but the glue factory was a great thing because it made work for forty-seven men. This sanitarium—we don't know what it is; dope fiends, maybe, or then again——"

"It's liver complaint," said Cullen. "Herb Pence told me that himself. Our mineral water's just as good for that as French Lick, if it was advertised. As for Commerce Street, the people that moved out went and bought lots in Pence's Addition and they're puttin' up bungalows a sight better than them old tumble-down shacks they had to leave."

"Quite so. Pence's bank lending them the money to buy from Pence, with second mortgages at eight per cent. Pence making everybody that builds a house take out flood-insurance policies in his own company, when there'll never be a flood again with the new dam up the river——"

"It was Pence got the State to build the dam; don't forget that."

"True," said Sellers. "After he'd bought up all the cornfields along the river to sell off as building lots, and got an option on the water-power rights."

"What if he did? He's a smart feller, Elmo Pence; smarter than you or me."

Sellers shrugged amiably.

"Oh, I don't deny that. Only I wish he'd let up on us now that he's got all the money a man ought

to need. When I think of the nice, pleasant, easy-goin' place this town used to be it seems to me a glue factory's all we ought to be asked to stand, without his loading a sanitarium on us too."

"Somebody's going to get this sanitarium. Some town along Willow River. Might as well be us as Vernon or Adamsville. Gosh knows we're a better town."

"Oh, I expect this Mr. Crisler will fall for us," Sellers conceded. "Colonel Hollis will give him some good old prewar hundred-and-ninety-proof oratory and Pence will fill him up with pep talk. And nobody will give away our weak points."

"What, for instance?"

"A plague of tramps, for one thing."

"Flint's gettin' rid of the tramps. Three of 'em locked in jail right now, I hear this morning. He's goin' right after 'em. Flint's a smart chief. Why, there ain't been a car stolen in this town in six months and I hear down to Adamsville you don't dare leave one out at the curb overnight. Vernon the same way. All along the river, but not here."

"Cheaper to have your car stolen than to pay one of Blades' repair bills," Sellers objected.

"You're a croaker," said Cullen, drawing a steaming cup of coffee for a new customer. "What call have you got to knock the town—and Pence?"

Sellers pulled on his pipe.

"Why, Dan," he observed presently, "my kick against Pence is only that he's a little too much. He's got his million—now let him stop. If there's any of the rest of us that don't want a million, let

him leave us alone. But no. He's got to have more. He's got to make us all go out for more. Pep —hustle—progress. He carries it too far. Tempting the Lord, they call it in Holy Writ. Hybris, the Greeks called it—when a man got so swelled up that he thought he was bigger than all the rest of the universe. And when he got that far, according to the Greeks, Nemesis lit on him. The universe tripped him up and showed him he was wrong. That's what happened to the Kaiser. Maybe I'm superstitious, but I kind of feel that maybe that's what will happen to Pence. And if we're still taggin' along at his coat tails when that time comes, Nemesis will get us too."

"You read too many books," Cullen told him. "I don't know nothing about this Nemesis stuff, but I've seen plenty of guys that'd ought to have been tripped up by the universe, and wasn't. They lived to a ripe old age and had good sermons preached over their remains and the heirs divided the estate. I don't care what these here Greeks say. Demopoulos down here at the candy store always draws to a three-card flush. Think he knows more about what's what than Pence?"

"If Pence drew to a three-card flush," Sellers admitted, "he'd ketch. Even if he had to ketch 'em out of his cuff. So long, Dan."

"Goin' down to the station? It's too early."

"I'm going out to the Country Club for a swim. Let Pence welcome his sanitarium."

"Goin' out to swim in a lake that wouldn't be there if Pence hadn't had the dam built."

"Mr. Pence didn't build the dam for my convenience," said Sellers. "The dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table."

"If you see this here Nemesis you speak of," remarked Cullen sardonically, "you want to tell him not to let Pence see him first. Likely he'd find himself in jail with the rest of the tramps."

II.

Accidental Advent of a Floating Laborer.

SOME hours before B. F. Crisler was greeted at the station with music and banners Nick Rexford dropped off the St. Louis freight at the water tank west of town. He had no intention of getting off at Hollisburg, or anywhere else so long as the train kept moving; but at the water tank the box car which had sheltered him for twenty-four hours suddenly was invaded by a prowling brakeman. Before Rexford could get out of the corner where he was lying half asleep the brakeman had climbed in; and though Rexford could have handled him in a rough-and-tumble, the brakie carried a crowbar. At sight of that Rexford rolled out of the other door of the box car, clutching his bundle done up in a black cotton handkerchief—out of the door and down the embankment, bringing up with a soft thump in the first furrows of a field of tall corn beside the track.

Above, his triumphant enemy shook a fist at him.

"Gwan, yuh bum."

"I've gone," said Rexford pacifically. "How far am I from New York?"

The brakeman grinned as the freight pulled on.

"About six months' walk. The roads ain't so good, either."

Nick Rexford looked about him thoughtfully. The track stretched away in a straight line, endless. Eastward, three or four miles away, were houses, lines of freight cars on a switch, the smoke from a tall stack. Away to the north a row of hills; behind him through the corn another ridge, dimly visible in the August haze. What this town might be he didn't know, nor even whether he was in Indiana or in Illinois; but he must be quite five hundred miles from his starting point in Kansas. So it couldn't be six months' walk to New York. Perhaps only four.

This town to the eastward was on the way home; but just now Rexford knew that he was unfit to enter any town. His gray suit and gray cap, once respectable, were stained and spotted. His brown shoes were worn in the sole and run over at the heel; his khaki shirt was only a khaki shirt; he was hot and grimy and full of cinders and he hadn't shaved in two days.

He peered again through the ranks of the corn and discerned a row of sycamores in the distance. That must mean water, and toward it he trudged slowly, his bundle over his shoulder. It was hot, soggily hot, here in the furrows, but not too hot for a veteran of the Kansas wheat fields. He hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours, hadn't had a square meal in three days; but that was getting to be almost chronic. All he really needed, by the modest standards he had learned to set for himself, was a bath and a shave.

And after perhaps ten minutes' walk he came to something that promised both of these—a typical

Middle Western river, zigzagging from side to side of a broad gravelly bed, with snags thrusting from the gravel here and there and masses of driftwood caught in the willow bushes that lined the banks. Just now it was a very tame river but in March it must have flowed far over the fields.

"Something like me," Rexford reflected. "I made quite a splash when things were coming my way; but when the source of supply dried up—— Now let's see if there's a swimming hole."

After a little exploration down the river he came suddenly on a long still pool. Sycamores overhung it on both sides, as far down as the distant bend; and in their deep shadow he could look down to a clear sandy bottom. Stripping, he plunged in, to swim with the vigor of an athlete who has been shut up for two days; then washed and shampooed busily with a cake of soap from his coat pocket, scrubbed his underclothes and hung them on the bushes to dry, and undid the black cotton bundle.

There was nothing in it but a black leather toilet case, expensive at one time, but sadly worn. However, it was enough for Rexford. He set up a hand mirror against the trunk of a sycamore, combed and brushed his hair, and proceeded to the long-overdue shave. It was slow and painful work, but it made a difference. When he had finished nobody would have known that he had just been thrown off a freight train. The disreputable clothes were hidden in the bushes; safe in the disguise of stark nakedness, Nick Rexford was a rather handsome young man of twenty-two or three, with black hair brushed back and humorously wrinkled eyes, who looked as if he

belonged on the edge of a swimming pool in some marbled athletic club, rather than under a tree on the river bank.

Which, in fact, he did; though he had been so long on the road that he sometimes forgot it.

Rexford reached into the pockets of his bedraggled coat, turned them wrong side out. There fell out, first, a folded road map of Kansas and Missouri. He had no more use for that. Then a jeweled college fraternity pin, which after some reflection he fastened on the under side of his coat lapel. He couldn't throw it away, not so much because of sentimental attachment to the order as because it represented his one link with the past; but to wear it openly, in his present state, would only attract attention and inquiry which he didn't want.

There was also a newspaper clipping which he carefully refolded and put back in an inside pocket. It was his patent of nobility; and with it he put away the two dimes which were all that he could find in the way of money. A sack of tobacco, a package of papers—that was all, except a pair of dice.

Rexford frowned at the cubes. They were the reason he was reduced to two dimes. Ten days ago the end of the wheat harvest had found him with two hundred dollars—the largest sum he had had in the past year, the largest amount of his own earned money he had ever had. Unaccustomed wealth brought back forgotten ambitions, the desire for more wealth; when he drifted into the county seat on Saturday night with his comrades from the fields he had put his roll behind the ivories. But the luck

he had always had in college had deserted him, apparently, with other kinds of luck; so instead of riding into New York in a Pullman he was walking into Hollisburg on a capital of twenty cents.

He rolled and lit a cigarette, blew a smoke ring out over the still water, and pondered. That stained and shabby coat was too vivid a reminder of a recent past and a present that he wanted to forget for so long as he could. He tossed the coat back into the bushes. In this deserted spot he could lie naked, drying in the breeze, and think of the real clothes he was going to have six weeks from now. What lay before him in those six weeks he neither knew nor cared. It would certainly be hard work, and trouble such as he wouldn't have had to meet but for that unlucky evening with the dice; but the past year had accustomed him to hard work and trouble. He could take them in his stride. He had learned to live from day to day, without worry; and he liked it.

But this recent disaster mustn't be repeated. Rexford picked up the dice and hurled them out into the river; they broke the untroubled smoothness of its surface with two tiny plunking splashes.

"No more for me," he said aloud. "The curse of Adam is on me. I have to work for mine."

And then, below and to one side of him, a voice broke the rural silence:

"Amazing!"

Rexford whirled about and saw a man who had swum up under cover of the overhanging bank, clinging to an outthrust sycamore root as he floated in the water—a man of forty or a little less, in a

bathing suit that had once been black but was faded to a dingy gray. A few wisps of sandy hair had been carefully combed across his broad bald skull, extended so flatly that they looked as if they had been glued on at both ends. A queer-looking man, but there was something in his voice that made Rexford glad his tramping clothes were out of sight and resentful that his solitude should be disturbed at all.

"What's amazing?" he asked resentfully. Clay Sellers rubbed his chin.

"Several things," he replied after a pause. "To mention only one, your costume ain't exactly usual hereabouts. Not even for swimming. The Country Club's just around the bend and I want you to know we wear regular Miami and Los Angeles bathing suits in this progressive town. But I take it you're a stranger."

"So much of a stranger," Rexford confessed, "that I don't even know whether I'm in Indiana or Illinois."

"You're in Hollis County, Indiana, and not far from the famed town of Hollisburg."

"Its fame has never reached me," Rexford admitted, "but no doubt the misfortune is mine."

"Well, I ain't so sure about that. Though there ain't many in Hollisburg that ever heard of your home town, either."

Rexford looked at him in amazement.

"My home town? What do you know—— Where do you think I come from?"

"Mount Olympus," said Sellers gravely.

"Mount Olympus?" Rexford repeated. "Where's that? I don't know your local geography."

Sellers sighed.

"Mount Olympus is in Greece, my young friend. It was much written about in them ancient days by authors out of whom I still get a good deal of pleasure, though I admit they ain't much read in our time. Olympus, as you may or may not have heard, was the home town of a flock of highly discreditable but entertaining gods, and like a lot of home towns it seems to have been valued mainly as a place to get away from. These gods were always comin' down to earth and they dressed about like you. So when I see a handsome young man settin' on the river bank stark naked I reckon I must have slipped back into them classic Grecian days, some way or other, and probably you're Apollo. He was always up to them tricks."

"Apollo, hell!" said Rexford with deep indignation. "Don't talk rot. I'm—— Oh, well, never mind who I am. Nobody of importance."

"Now don't say that," Sellers protested. "So long as I can think you're somebody of importance you're a mystery, and mysteries are blame scarce in a small town where you've lived all your life as I've lived in Hollisburg. But I guess it's just as well you ain't Apollo, anyway. As I remember he usually came down to earth for no good purpose."

Rexford grunted irritably. In the way of mysteries, it was rather surprising to meet a swimmer in an Indiana river who took perverse pleasure in flinging the classics at him; but he was more interested in geography than in mysteries.

"How far am I from New York?" he demanded.

"Eight or nine hundred miles."

"Huh! That's a long way."

"True, but what of it? It's less'n four miles to Hollisburg and I reckon I'm the only citizen that wouldn't tell you Hollisburg is a better town than New York. Just now they're all turned out at the railroad station, waitin' to give the keys of the city to a gentleman that's goin' to plant a liver sanitarium in our midst; but we might spare a latchkey for Apollo if he'd promise not to hang around the local nymphs."

Rexford made an impatient gesture. Then, as he drew breath for another question, the summer stillness was broken by distant voices and splashings down the river, toward the bend; the smooth green water was stirred by flashing white arms and bright bobbing bathing caps.

"Speaking of nymphs," said Sellers. But Rexford had already disappeared into the shrubbery.

The bushes rippled as he jerked his drying clothes out of sight; and Sellers, abandoning his mystery, swam downstream to draw the two girls away from the neighborhood. He met them halfway to the bend, floated, chatted with them in midstream—Leila Pence, plump and corn-fed, in a new one-piece suit of green Jersey silk; Ruth Hollis, slim and energetic, in a black satin slip which the whole club had recognized as the residue of last winter's party dress. Sellers said nothing of the mysterious stranger; as a good lawyer he kept mysteries to himself. So when Leila said that they really must be getting back to the clubhouse because the fellows were waiting, Sellers swam away with the girls, and after an in-

terval Rexford crawled out of the bushes and put on his clothes.

He was no Apollo, but he had something of an eye for nymphs. The chubby girl in green wasn't to his taste at all. She was a Middle Western type he knew well enough—not in its home, for in this year of wanderings he had never risen high enough to speak to a girl like Leila Pence. But he had seen the daughters of local Middle Western magnates, in New York and Palm Beach, in Paris and Deauville—ornate and aggressive, dressed with worried regard of formal correctness and ostentatious disregard of expense, because among people who didn't know who they were their clothes were the only guide to what they were. All right, of course, but he didn't care for them.

But the other girl was different. She swam beautifully—his memory carried the easy graceful sweep of her strong white arms; but the thing that disturbed him was the sardonic twist of her mouth, the rather defiant sullenness of her handsome face. Here was no ordinary all-too-contented small-town girl. He had seen faces like that since the war, in Vienna and Budapest, even in Paris and London—women of what had once been an aristocracy, women whose world had crashed beneath their feet and who preferred to smile at it disdainfully rather than let themselves crash with it. This must be a peculiar town which contained a girl like that and a man who talked with irreverent familiarity of the ancient Greeks and their gods.

However, his clothes were a reminder that nymphs

meant nothing in his life now, nor he in theirs. The immediate business was to get something to eat; the ultimate business, of course, to get back to New York. But there was plenty of time; he didn't have to be in New York for six weeks more. And he was tired of box cars and the blind baggage. It seemed reasonable to walk on into this town, find a job, earn enough to keep him alive and to lay aside a little toward his railroad fare to the next town; then go on and repeat, till his wander-year should be over at last.

Five minutes later he came out on an oiled motor road along the river, reduced once more to the social level of his clothes. During his conversation with this queer man in the water Rexford had forgotten that he was a tramp, but now he found himself slinking along in the familiar mood, apologetic and resentful, that had been begotten by a long series of mishaps. When he realized this, a mile or so down the road, he pulled himself together, threw back his shoulders, and strode out with something of a swagger; but just then an automobile horn honked behind him, and he stepped automatically out of the way like a peasant giving place to the lord of the manor.

And in fact it was the lord of the manor, or at least his heir. This bright blue car with a shiny nickel hood carried young Herb Pence and his sister Leila, and George Blades who was engaged to Leila, and Ruth Hollis who was likely to be engaged to Herb before long—all coming back from their morning of tennis and swimming and in a hurry because

Herb and Blades were going to the banquet for Mr. Crisler. But they were not in so much of a hurry that they didn't see the lone pedestrian trudging along by the side of the road.

"Another bo," Herb grunted. "Too many of them, now the town's growing."

"Tell Flint to look out for this bird," Blades advised from the back seat. And since everybody knew that Flint, the chief of police, would do what the Pences recommended, Ruth Hollis stared curiously at Flint's next victim as the car shot past. Rexford caught a glimpse of a white bandeau about black bobbed hair, and a handsome somber face that he had last seen in the water, under a red bathing cap. A curiously dissatisfied face, proudly sullen; and sullenness was the last thing to be expected in this fat, comfortable country.

Ahead of him the car stopped suddenly.

"No use bothering Flint," Herb Pence grunted. "I'll fix this fellow."

For though this morning outing was his party Ruth had almost ignored him. She was polite, but not even coldly polite; indifferently polite; she had swum off up the river with Leila while he and Blades were tarrying in the locker rooms for a little drink, and had come back with Clay Sellers, whom Herb despised. Of course nobody took Clay Sellers seriously, but Herb wasn't quite sure that Ruth took Herb Pence as seriously as she had seemed to do a few months ago. She must see that he was a serious factor in the life of Hollisburg, that he could protect the community, order tramps out of town,

keep them out by his own force if need be. Once she realized his manly prowess, his ability to master a situation, she would appreciate him a little more highly.

So he reasoned as he strode off down the oiled roadway, leaving Ruth wearily wondering why Herb got satisfaction out of trampling on inferior and pitiable persons like this shabby derelict, plodding toward them with the unwearied persistence of a man who has a long way to go.

Rexford looked up suddenly into the frowning face of a stocky young man in white flannels. Not even the frown could make Herb Pence's face look as terrible as Herb felt. It was a fat pink face under a bristling growth of tawny hair; it looked altogether too full and contented. But Herb was visibly trying to look terrible; and he was strongly built.

"Where are you going?" he demanded in a peremptory tone that carried, and was meant to carry, to the three onlookers in the waiting automobile.

"New York," Rexford admitted courteously.

"New York?" Herb hadn't expected this, and his next remark, carefully prepared, wouldn't fit into his design of the conversation. All the Pences had to practice their gestures and were seriously upset if anything put them off the track. Flustered and angry, he searched for a phrase that would provoke resentment, start a fight, and enable him to knock out this man who was considerably smaller than himself. And as he was searching he caught Rexford's curious glance and broke in with a sharp—

"What are you looking at?"

In fact, Rexford was looking at the Phi Chi fra-

ternity pin on Pence's shirt; its mate was hidden under his own coat lapel. But it was not the moment for a display of fraternal emotion.

"Nothing," he said mildly.

Herb shifted from one foot to the other. His moral offensive had gone wrong. This miserable creature refused to give him any provocation. That might not have hindered him if Ruth hadn't been looking, but he wanted Ruth to see a victorious battle, not a gratuitous massacre. His display of mastery wasn't coming off.

"No impudence, now," he snarled, "or I'll lay you out. Go on to New York, or wherever you're going to; but don't stop in Hollisburg."

Rexford sighed.

"Can you think of any reason," he asked, "why anybody should stop in Hollisburg?"

"Huh?" Herb demanded. And then he heard ruinous sounds behind him. Laughter—the soft contemptuous laughter of Ruth Hollis, the harsher but just as derisive laughter of George Blades. Only Leila Pence, true to the traditions of her family and their town, saw nothing funny in it.

Herb teetered from one foot to the other, his fists clenched. He wanted to strike this maddeningly mild face, mash it into bloody pulp. But something kept him back. There was a hard readiness in those eyes that was not inviting; this slim young fellow, on closer observation, seemed rather strong. Herb would have taken the risk if he had had provocation that would have seemed plausible to Ruth; he would have risked Ruth's displeasure if he had been sure of victory. But the double hazard was too much.

So he glowered at Rexford for a moment and then turned away with a growling:

"Make a detour around Hollisburg, you. If we catch you in town you'll pound rock."

He climbed into the car without looking at Ruth.

"Wouldn't dirty my hands on him," he explained. "He wasn't worth it."

III.

Inhospitable Demeanor of a Leading Citizen.

AN hour behind the speeding blue car, Rexford came into Hollisburg. To the right, above the business section—which was exactly like the business sections of a hundred other towns he had seen in the past year—the hill rose sharply, with stately trees lining the steep streets and old houses half hidden by the foliage.

But on his left, in the flat lands along the river, was a different town—Pence's Addition, the signboards triumphantly shouted. A wilderness of half-finished bungalows, set in tiny lots separated by high white trellises; beyond, rows of houses finished and occupied, each with its square white garage and its white-painted clothes pole mushrooming in the back yard. To Rexford, Pence's Addition looked painfully like one of the newer ready-to-wear Long Island suburbs of New York, out of place in this pleasant unexciting landscape that he was learning to like. And it centered about a great white stucco castle on the river front, its red-tiled gables rising high above the cottages about it, set back in an immense flat lawn well grown with transplanted shrubbery. Over all hung the smell of the oil that lay thick and black in the clotted dust of the streets.

"I suppose," he mused, "that Pence lives in the

middle of his own addition. The sort of man that would put up this flock of chicken coops would be proud enough of it to live there himself. I certainly see no reason to tarry in this town of Hollisburg."

Main Street was almost empty—B. F. Crisler had arrived and was dining with the leading citizens at the Pershing House; other citizens were dining at home and telling their wives about the unimpressive appearance of the Chicago capitalist. Rexford didn't know that, of course. He merely walked on till he saw the sign "Dan Cullen: Lunch." At Cullen's counter he spent one of his dimes for a sandwich and a cup of coffee, then rolled a cigarette and smoked on his stool, watching Main Street come back to life after the dinner hour. Here in town his clothes, though rather dusty, were no more disreputable than those of some of the curbstone loungers; Cullen had treated him not as a hobo but as a customer. Rexford addressed him hopefully.

"What chance of picking up some work? This looks like a live town."

"Sure it's a live town. What kind of work?"

"Almost any kind."

"Sounds like old times," Cullen observed. "Nowadays most folks pick and choose. What can you do?"

"Well, if you're short-handed, I can make coffee and fry eggs."

"Not a chance. Got any more talents?"

"I can drive a car, take it to pieces and put it together again; pitch hay, hoe corn, shock wheat; swing a pick; break horses if they're not too wild——"

"In fact," Cullen grinned, "you pretty blame near invented labor, didn't you? Well, if you know so much about cars you might try Blades' garage. It's pretty much of a close corporation there—George has got his own gang—all niggers but him and his man Rufe. But they're rushed with work."

"Thanks," said Rexford. "I'll try it. Mind if I park this bundle behind the counter for the afternoon? There's no dynamite in it."

Blades' garage was at the corner of Main and Poplar—a two-story building of cement blocks, square and ugly, its entrance flanked by red and yellow gasoline pumps. Rexford thrust his head into the little office where a stooped man in overalls looked up from the roll-top desk with a malignant cross-eyed glance.

"Mr. Blades, I suppose?" Rexford suggested. "I'm looking for a job."

"I ain't Blades and there's no jobs."

Rexford had long passed the stage of being discouraged by this familiar remark.

"I can see from here," he said, "that you're shorthanded. And I can do anything around your shop."

"Oh, you can, eh?" said the other, rising. "You think you know so durned much, you come see Blades. He's around side."

Rexford turned into the unpaved side street where tall elms arched out from the sidewalk to meet over the roadway. The man from the office was close behind him—almost suspiciously close behind him—following in his tracks as they marched down the long side of the cement building to the board fence surrounding a row of sheds behind it. Just outside

the gate a negro was painting an old car; and behind it squatted a man in white flannels who straightened up with springy quickness at the sound of footsteps.

"What's this, Rufe?"

"Feller wants a job," said the cross-eyed one. "Won't believe me when I tell him there ain't any."

Rexford looked up into a long, cold, colorless face under close-cropped blond hair, with light blue eyes looking down coldly into his. It was a face he had seen that morning, in the back seat of the bright blue car; and George Blades evidently remembered him. He was silent for a moment, reflective, then menacing.

"You were told to walk around this town," he said in a soft hissing voice. "You'll wish you had if the cops run across you."

"Why make me pound rock," Rexford argued plausibly, "when I'm an expert mechanic of the kind you need?"

"So you're an expert mechanic, are you? Know anything about a Sagamore car?"

"I used to drive one."

Blades' eyes ran over him and Rexford flushed at the realization that he didn't even look like a rich man's chauffeur fallen on evil days.

"Whose?" Blades demanded.

"My own," said Rexford irritably.

"Your own? Hell! Get out. No jobs here. And if you're still in town in half an hour you'll be headed for the rock pile."

Rexford wanted to hit this tall sneering person much more than he had wanted to hit the fat sneer-

ing youth in the road that morning. But he had wanted to hit a good many people in the past year; a few of them he had hit, at first; and he had learned that it doesn't pay to hit a prosperous citizen of a strange town. So he swallowed his native impulses and turned away with a pretense of indifference; and as he turned he saw a man grinning at him across the street; a youngish man, almost bald, smoking a corncob pipe, who sat in a chair tilted back against the wall of a story-and-a-half brick building under the sign:

H. Clay Sellers
Attorney and Counselor at Law

Now Clay Sellers was grinning at Blades, whose irritable brutality toward helpless inferiors wasn't at all like his smooth social manner. Malicious side lights on respected characters always amused Clay Sellers. But Rexford, of course, didn't know that. He knew only that a man who had talked to him as equal to equal, when his clothes were out of sight, was now laughing at him when he was revealed as a floating laborer. So he strode across the street, flushed with an almost forgotten sensitiveness.

"Clothes make the bum," he said sullenly. "I suppose you wasted a lot of unnecessary curiosity on me this morning. Well, you see I'm a tramp. Know anybody that wants to give me a job?"

"What kind of job?"

"Any kind."

"Such eagerness deserves its reward," said Sellers. "Any kind."

He glanced across the street; Blades and Rufe were watching them sharply. Sellers stared back at them, puffing his pipe.

"Any kind?" he repeated. "Well, I hear Colonel Hollis needs his grass cut."

"Where do I find him?" Rexford demanded promptly. He didn't see the grins that crept over the faces of Blades and Rufe; he didn't pay attention to the wrinkles around Clay Sellers' eyes.

"Well," said Sellers, "likely he's still down at the hotel. I saw him there at the Chamber of Commerce banquet and I reckon the most prominent citizens haven't left yet. The Pershing House. An old gentleman with a gray walrus mustache and a plug hat that's seen better days. You can't miss him."

"Thanks," said Rexford, and strode away cheerily. This ought to enable him to earn his supper and a night's lodging and every day was one more day. He would be in bondage only six weeks more.

Behind him Blades grinned across the street at Sellers.

"That was a mean one, Clay."

"I told the truth," Sellers drawled. "The Colonel does need his grass cut."

"This fellow a friend of yours?" Blades asked.

"Oh, I ran across him up the river this morning." And, once started, Sellers told of the curious encounter in some detail. "I had a hunch he might be a visitor from Mars," he explained, "or somebody that fell out of an airplane. Never struck me that he might be a plain knight of the road." Though he remembered as he said it that Rexford

wasn't at all an ordinary hobo. There was still a pleasant mystery; enough to muse over on a dull afternoon.

"Looks as if that's what he is," Blades agreed. "Probably stole that leather toilet case you saw him using. Yes, it was funny."

But when he and the stooping Rufe had wandered back to the garage, out of Sellers' hearing, they looked at each other with questioning suspicion.

"Damn funny," said Rufe. "You don't reckon——"

"I don't mean to take a chance," Blades told him. "He's no hobo; you saw his face. And he was mighty persistent about getting in here. Rufe, you go tell Flint about him. No rock pile for him; tell Flint to run him out of town."

IV.

A Traveler Views the Ruins.

A BLOCK down brick-paved Main Street was the Pershing House, and on its wide veranda Colonel Hollis lounged in a rocking-chair, talking to B. F. Crisler. Rexford knew the Colonel at sight, but approaching him was another matter. The silk hat and frock coat were antique, but there was a rather fierce dignity in the lion face framed in curly gray hair, and the head built on the grand scale of the Daniel Webster period. It would be an impertinence, Rexford felt, to address this gentleman on any subject of less importance than the tariff —which, in fact, was the topic he was then discussing with the colorless man in steel-rimmed spectacles and thin grayish hair who sat beside him.

For Mr. Crisler this conversation represented the first chance to get his bearings in an exhausting and astounding day. It had never occurred to Mr. Crisler that Hollisburg would be so acutely and violently interested in a sanitarium that was still only in the talking stage. He never dreamed that the leading members of the Chamber of Commerce would have read up so thoroughly on the sanitarium business that they were able to pelt him with questions often beyond his power to answer.

But Colonel Hollis volunteered no data about tax

rates and mean annual rainfall, and asked no questions about sanitariums. It was his job to put the cultural frosting on the utilitarian cake of Hollisburg; he talked to Mr. Crisler as man to man, as one thoughtful citizen to another, about the tariff. And fortunately Mr. Crisler could discuss the tariff from his subconsciousness while he readjusted his state of mind and his conversational resources to meet the eager inquisitive hospitality of Hollisburg.

Rexford watched the conversation, lounging diffidently on the sidewalk, and had almost made up his mind that it was safe to break in when the interview was suddenly ended by the appearance at the hotel steps of the biggest and most luxurious automobile in southern Indiana, and the descent of the local god from the machine. A stocky, commanding man in a cream silk suit, St. Elmo Pence pounded up the steps to the hotel porch and announced in a voice that could be heard up and down the street:

"Well, Mr. Crisler, have to interrupt you. We must get out and take a look at the town and the surrounding country. Behind time already."

He didn't even bother to apologize to Colonel Hollis, who responded with stately dignity to Crisler's courteous farewell. Nor did Hollis overhear Pence's remark as the car bore him and Crisler away:

"I shouldn't have let that old windbag waste so much of your time."

"He seems to be a very entertaining and well-informed gentleman," said Crisler mildly. Pence's hand waved in deprecation.

"Oh, the Colonel can talk. That's all he can do

—he's talked me out of a lot of money. One of our historic antiquities, old Hollis. We took his measure long ago, but I suppose it's hardly fair to inflict him on a stranger. Now, Mr. Crisler, the Masonic Temple on your left; the Pence Building on the opposite corner——"

Pence's abruptness had had no perceptible effect on Colonel Hollis; indeed, he had hardly noticed it. There were many things in Hollisburg that Oliver Perry Morton Hollis didn't notice, more and more each year. If he had noticed them he would have found life intolerable, perhaps; which may have been the reason why his consciousness automatically rejected them. To avert the painful contact between rude facts and refined sensibilities, the Colonel found it easier to protect the sensibilities than to change the facts. (His daughter Ruth could do neither.)

So now, instead of reflecting on the disdainful rudeness of St. Elmo Pence, he thought only that Mr. Crisler had turned out to be a very entertaining and well-informed gentleman. His hand slipped toward his vest pocket; it came out with a cigar—one of the fifty-cent cigars provided especially for the honorific banquet by the Chamber of Commerce. As he came down the porch steps he lit it, inhaled a deep draft, closed his eyes, opened them slowly, and blew a cloud of aromatic blue smoke down the street. And it was in that unfamiliar mood of expansive magnificence that the watchful Rexford caught him.

"Colonel Hollis?"

The Colonel jerked back the huge square-cornered

head and stared curiously at this shabby but rather engaging young man.

"Yes, sir."

"I was told you wanted somebody to cut your grass."

Another blue cloud floated away toward the corner as the Colonel came back from affairs of state to the petty cares of the household, but his spirit was still in that fragrant haze of Havana vapors.

"Why, yes," he rumbled. "It does need cutting. Undoubtedly. I hadn't thought of it, but it does. You know the house, of course?"

"I'm a stranger in town."

"Ah! Of course. The gray brick house at the head of Elm Street. Anybody can show you the way. You will find the necessary implements on the premises."

He stalked away slowly, ringed in blue smoke wreaths, as Nick Rexford asked his way to Elm Street.

It turned off the Main Street brick, a side street running southward, dusty under its coating of smelly oil, shadowed by infrequent trees. As he went on the shade trees grew closer together, the houses farther apart. Pence's Addition and the business section of Hollisburg were flagrantly up to date, with a conscious and painful effort that annoyed him, though he conjectured it didn't annoy the residents. But a block down Elm Street he had dropped back a quarter of a century, into McKinley's administration; and every corner took him a decade farther back.

First a straggling zone of old brick houses, half business, half residential, set close to the street, their narrow strips of lawn held up by knee-high walls. Beyond the next corner the street rose gradually between fenced yards that surrounded frame or shingle residences, with the rounded protuberant fronts, the thin-posted porches, of thirty years ago, and stained-glass windows on the stair landings halfway up the side wall. The slope grew steeper, the houses older, uglier and more stately. By imperceptible stages Rexford found himself mounting a rather abrupt hill. The lawns were larger now, and more unkempt, set with elms and beeches whose smallest limbs were more imposing than the lately planted saplings of Pence's Addition. Grass grew between the cracked and waterworn flagstones of the sidewalks; tufts of weed thrust up from the decayed macadam of the street.

Pence's Addition had been lively with the shouts of children, the hum of vacuum cleaners, the soft hiss of sprinklers whirring on the lawns; but a great quiet hung over the Elm Street hill. The children had grown up and gone away to the city forty years ago. Now and then the hushed murmur of voices in a parlor, dim behind drawn blinds; the distant hum of a sewing machine. The oil smell that hung over the lower town was lost in these higher altitudes, and Rexford caught the faint odor of the full-blown, haze-hung vegetation of August, on the brink of autumnal decay.

High above the business section a final cross street cut across the head of the roadway, the hill rising behind it in precipitous, thicket-covered slopes. Be-

tween the thickets and the street lay a row of brooding, sleepy brick houses, homes of the great families of a Hollisburg that had died before the Pences were born. And right at the head of Elm Street was the biggest and oldest of them all, the Hollis mansion. It sat high up on the hillside, at the top of a long flight of flagstone steps running up between sentinel lines of sycamores. Along the street a stone wall had once held back the terraced lawn; but terraces had shifted into formless bulges, and gaps had opened in the wall so long ago that the blue grass grew long and smooth over the débris spreading out over the sidewalk. Rexford mounted the steps slowly and stood at last before a closed, shuttered and silent house.

A huge tall house of brick that had once been painted gray, with a cupola rising from the mansard roof. There were gaps in the slats of the tall shutters; at more than one window they were missing altogether; everywhere threadbare blue shades were drawn clear down to the floor. Curling chips of paint clung to the brick walls and the shutter slats, and when Rexford tugged at the pull bell he heard no sound.

Another pull, with the same result. He rolled and lit a cigarette. It was pleasant, here on the hill; for the first time in a year—perhaps in his life—he felt free from the never-ending push of the struggle for money, for getting on. Even before he had ever dreamed that work could enter his life he had felt its pressure, the irresistible pressure of a world where nearly everybody was working at frantic speed. But here on the Elm Street hill work

was an incongruous thought. No doubt such things happened, but they were a part of life, not all. There was time for reflection; for rest.

And yet the quiet of the hill street was the quiet of old age's armchair, if not of the grave. This had been a great house sixty years ago, but its present ruin was so shabby that it had lost even the mournful splendor of decayed magnificence. And on the terraced lawn grew a tangle of vegetation two feet high.

Rexford had come to cut the grass. But grass survived only in scattered patches—tall patches of blue grass gone to seed, struggling hard to keep up its head like a decadent aristocracy among pushing parvenues, and just as surely about to be choked out by the thick-growing weeds. Colonel Hollis' lawn was a weed patch; obviously it hadn't been cut this year, nor last.

Rexford perceived that he had been made the victim of a local joke. Yet Colonel Hollis had sent him up here, had expected evidently that he would find somebody who would put him to work. So he tossed away his cigarette and took the weed-grown sidewalk around to the back door.

V.

The Laborer and His Hire.

HIS footfalls muffled by the weeds, he came up silently behind a girl who stood beside the back steps, washing one of the long windows that even here came clear down to the floor. Her bare white arms moved in long sure strokes, just as he had seen them flashing on the river this morning. At first sight he had supposed she was hired help, but her clothes looked like an outworn sports costume—a faded blue sleeveless sweater, a shabby white skirt, white stockings and white canvas shoes. He wondered, and while he wondered she saw his face reflected in the window pane and faced about.

He looked into the somber face he had seen in the river under a red bathing cap, in Herb Pence's car beneath a white bandeau. Just now a dust cloth was caught about her black bobbed hair like a turban, but it didn't spoil the face.

"No handouts here," she said with a not unkindly finality.

Of course—she must have thought him a tramp. Yet plainly she wasn't afraid.

"I didn't come for a handout," he said quietly. "I was sent up here to cut the grass."

He suspected that this announcement must have been a stunning surprise to Ruth Hollis, a reversal

of the whole order of nature; but she didn't show it. She merely looked at him, silently, for a moment, then asked:

"Who sent you?"

"Colonel Hollis. At least"—Rexford suddenly suspected deeper trickery—"at least a gentleman who was pointed out to me as Colonel Hollis. With a gray mustache, and a silk hat——"

A smile slid across the somber face.

"I guess that's right. There are only three silk hats in town and we know them all by name. . . . You'll find a scythe and a rake in the woodshed. And a whetstone. You'll probably need it."

Without giving him any further attention she went back to the business of washing windows.

Rexford would have liked to sentimentalize this interview, in his own reflections at least. He and she were companions in undeserved distress. They were of the same class; he felt, vaguely, that she had perceived that too. A girl, more than usually attractive, of an old and once wealthy family, reduced to washing windows in a ruined house. A young man who ought to be playing polo on Long Island but was condemned to seeking odd jobs at kitchen doors. They were—why, they were like the traditional high-bred pair flung ashore on a desert island and compelled to hustle for enough to eat. He wished they might talk it over.

But evidently she was not inclined to talk it over. Indeed, her matter-of-fact attitude left him no excuse for sentimentalizing the situation even in his own thoughts. Work, he conjectured, was an old story with her—older than with him. She didn't

even treat him as an employer would treat a laborer; she didn't treat him at all. Her business was washing windows and his was cutting the grass, and that was all there was to it.

Suppressing the inclination to sentimentality, whose sudden appearance had rather shocked him —he thought he had pretty well conquered sentimentality in this past year—he set to work, and presently found a sort of compensating contentment in the rhythmic swing of the scythe. It was an absurd and antiquated exercise, surviving even in Hollisburg, he supposed, only here on the hill where the slopes were too steep for lawn mowers; but there was a regularity about it that brought his muscles and nerves back into harmony. He swung with an easy tireless grace—nothing like those terrible first weeks last summer when each day brought new aches and sorenesses to a body more or less hardened by the genteel sports, but never prepared for manual labor.

But now—Rexford made the discovery with some horror—he was beginning to like manual labor. Swinging a scythe—at least under the shade of Colonel Hollis's sycamores—was about as much fun as swinging a golf club. Of course, manual labor offered no easy road to wealth and fame; he had been driven to it unwillingly; yet he began to wonder if he wouldn't like it as a regular occupation when he no longer had to live on it.

Hour after hour he mowed, whetted, raked, through the long hot afternoon. It was satisfying, soothingly restful, here on the silent shaded hill. At first sight he had hated Hollisburg—its machine-

made business district, the cheap smartness of Pence's Addition. But the hill was the refuge of an older, more leisured civilization that still retained some grace and dignity even in decay. They must have been pleasant people who lived here in the sixties and seventies. Probably the stock had run down in more recent times, yet there had been nothing decadent in the appearance of that girl at the back door.

He supposed she was still working somewhere in the house, behind the drawn shades, but he saw no more of her; heard no more of her till late in the afternoon when he heard her playing on a feeble piano, playing Debussy with a light touch that covered up occasional lapses in technique by virtue of a full supply of temperament. If her playing bore truthful witness, the sardonic sullenness concealed a good deal of fire. . . . But as Rexford mused so far, he saw Colonel Hollis toiling up the long flight of steps, his silk hat in his hand and a big silk handkerchief mopping his pink forehead. Rexford reminded himself that his business was cutting grass; the whetstone rasped shrilly, the scythe began to swing again.

Half an hour later, with the lawn smoothly mown and the last clothes basketful of grass piled behind the woodshed, Rexford came to the kitchen door to get his pay. His feet hastened of their own accord as he came within earshot of a kitchen range where something was snapping in a skillet. Exercise had given him a fierce appetite. Through the screen door floated out the smell of frying chicken and

the aroma of a coffee which wasn't at all like the cup he had had at the lunch counter. Only a sandwich since yesterday morning; three days since he had had a square meal; but in half an hour he would be eating everything Dan Cullen had to offer. The expectation of even Dan Cullen's fare made him restless as he knocked timidly at the back door.

Ruth appeared behind the screen, a long bungalow apron swathing her blue dress.

"I'm through," said Rexford.

"How much were you to get?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "Whatever is customary."

"You came about two o'clock," said Ruth, "and now it's six. Wait a minute."

He waited while voices murmured indistinctly within and the fried chicken and coffee continued to rouse aspirations that could never be gratified at Dan Cullen's. Then he heard her returning footsteps and the Colonel's voice booming beyond:

"Ask the young man into the library, Ruth."

Rexford followed her through a high narrow hallway, with a narrow straight stair descending precipitously within its black-walnut railing; through a parlor furnished with horsehair sofas and marble-topped tables of carved walnut; into the library. On the parlor wall he had seen great splotches of bare plaster where the ancient wall paper had fallen away; but the library wall was hidden by tall walnut bookcases, except for the rectangle over the roll-top desk where the portrait of a lady in crinolines hung in a chipped lacquer frame. Thousands of books,

but all in ancient bindings of calf or worn morocco. Nothing in that house—except Ruth—was less than fifty years old.

Colonel Hollis had laid aside the frock coat and vest, and sat in the informal ease of blue suspenders and a bulging stiff shirt held together by a single gold stud. The lion head was reared back; but the face was gloomy, helpless, weakly ashamed. Ruth moved to her father's side and stood there straight and uncompromising as the Colonel cleared his throat.

"You have worked four hours, my daughter tells me. I believe the usual rate for such labor here is twenty-five cents an hour. Hm! Unfortunately, I left my pocketbook at the office and we do not seem to have much small change about the house. If you will call on me in the Hollis Building to-morrow morning——"

To-morrow morning! The smell of frying chicken floated in through the open door.

"Colonel Hollis," said Rexford, lost to his sense of shame, "I have just ten cents in my pockets. I came into town this morning and I've got to eat. Nobody knows me; I haven't any credit."

The Colonel and his daughter looked at each other grimly. "May I ask," said the Colonel huskily, "how you came to apply to me for work? Who told you I wanted my grass cut?"

"I don't know who he was—I'm a stranger. I asked one or two men on the street where I could get some work and I was told that your grass need —that you wanted somebody to cut your grass."

Ruth waved a hand in helpless anger as the

Colonel sat up straighter and thumped his desk.

"Whippersnappers!" he snorted. "Contemptible whippersnappers! I am unable, sir, to discharge my obligation to you this evening, but you must not suffer from my fault. I shall be delighted if you will sup with us."

Nick Rexford turned white.

"Colonel, I—I can't do that."

"Can't?" the Colonel rumbled.

"Of course I can't. I'm a—casual laborer, I believe the sociologists call it. In plain language, a tramp. Your daughter will tell you that she saw me walking into town this morning and heard me ordered to keep out of Hollisburg. And my clothes are——"

"My dear sir," said the Colonel frigidly, "I do not propose to submit to dictation as to whom I shall invite to my own table. Your clothes and your occupation are beside the point. If I choose to ask you to supper, that is none of your business. Ruth, have them serve the meal whenever it is ready. Well, Mr.—Mr. Rexford?—well, sir, it looks as if there is a good deal of dissatisfaction with the tariff——"

They dined in a tall bay-windowed room, at a battered walnut table set with worn damask and a miscellaneous assortment of fine china, chipped and cracked—dined on fried chicken and gravy, grapefruit salad, hot biscuit, three kinds of jelly and sweet-potato pie. The Hollises might have fallen from their high estate but they still set a good table. And when Ruth took away the dinner dishes to make place for the coffee pot the Colonel disappeared for a moment and came back with two of the fifty-

cent cigars provided at the noon banquet by the Chamber of Commerce, which he had thriftily stowed away for the evening.

The Colonel led the conversation, with grave courtesy; the crops, the tariff, the changes in the Willow River valley since the new dam controlled the annual floods; the prospects in the fall elections. Not a word about the Hollises; not a word about the past or the future of Nick Rexford. It was the sort of conversation the Colonel might have conducted with any well-informed visitor; it was in fact substantially the conversation he had conducted with B. F. Crisler earlier in the day.

Rexford hadn't had the advantage of a rehearsal, but he did his duty, talking not much but with sensible moderation. Ruth sat behind her coffeepot with a dignity and composure that couldn't altogether conceal a youthful vitality, subdued but not deadened by the burden of this great dying house. She threw in the occasional intelligent interjection that might be expected from a woman citizen who was going to cast her first vote this fall. No less than her father, she made Rexford feel at home—when she talked.

But while she was removing the dishes, or serving him, he felt a difference in her manner. She might have been a captive Roman princess setting a meal before a triumphant Goth. It was his comfort, as he picked his way down the precipitous slope of Elm Street through the night, that there had been nothing Gothic about his behavior. He hoped they might have found him unexpectedly satisfactory for a tramp who had worked for his supper.

VI.

Theory of the Leisure Class.

IF Rexford had known his way about town, or if he had gone straight down to Main Street and followed it back to the lunch counter where he had left his baggage, he would have been run out of Hollisburg that night. Police Chief Flint, under the prodding of two citizens so prominent as George Blades and Herb Pence, had hunted about and discovered the bundle behind Cullen's lunch counter; had opened it, and concluded that this expensive leather case must have been stolen by the tramp who carried it; and was persuaded with difficulty that it would be better to drive the tramp out of town than to lock him up pending the collection of evidence to support a charge of theft.

Flint waited at the lunch counter for Rexford's inevitable return; the only reason he didn't look for him at Colonel Hollis'—the joke having been duly passed on to him—being that nobody could have foreseen that the Colonel, under the influence of a fifty-cent cigar, would so far forget realities as to hire a man to cut his grass. But Rexford tried a short cut back to the lunch counter, got lost and finally found himself coming down toward Main Street on the quiet thoroughfare that ran past George Blades' garage. And in front of the story-

and-a-half brick house that faced the side entrance sat his adviser of the afternoon, smoking a corncob pipe and regarding Rexford as he came into the light from the street lamp with a benevolent and rather compunctious curiosity.

Rexford stopped short and looked at the man in the chair, then at the sign:

H. Clay Sellers
Attorney and Counselor at Law

"You may get by as an attorney," he observed, "but you're a hell of a counselor."

"I reckon so," Sellers sighed. "Did I get you into trouble?"

"Me? Don't worry about me. The only thing you did to me was to give me a chance to look at the humiliation of a fine old gentleman——"

He choked into outraged silence. Sellers' eyes were still smiling.

"Yes," he agreed, "Colonel Hollis is a fine old gentleman. If we forget that sometimes, in his home town, it's because he's done nothing but be a fine old gentleman ever since he was born. I've got nothing against being a fine old gentleman, but it's not exactly a gainful occupation. And since somebody has to pay the freight, the Colonel merely manages to shift the burden.

"So he didn't want his grass cut, after all? Now, dern me, I ought to have been humanly decent enough not to do that to a stranger within our gates, especially when you really wanted a job. I'm ashamed

of myself, that's a fact. And if I can do anything to make it up——"

"You can't," said Rexford. "I cut his grass, you see, and if I call at his office to-morrow morning I'll get a dollar for it. But, Mr. H. Clay Sellers, I believe the old man needs that dollar more than I do. I'm down to my last dime, but I haven't got an establishment to keep up. So I'm going to collect my baggage and move on."

"Where to?"

"Eventually to New York. To-night, to the nearest comfortable haystack."

Clay Sellers chewed his pipe stem.

"I'd advise you not," he observed. "For one thing, the police are waitin' for you down at the lunch counter. They ain't made up their minds yet whether to lock you up for stealin' that nice leather case you shave out of or set the dogs on you and run you out of town on general principles."

"Let them," said Rexford sullenly. "If they think——"

"Hold on, now. Never get fresh with the chief of police in a strange town. Besides, Hollisburg is run by its best people, and I gather that for some reason they've passed the word to Flint that you're to get the gate without fail."

"So he meant it," Rexford mused.

"Who meant what?" Sellers asked. "If he said it around Hollisburg, whoever he was, of course he meant it, whatever it was. I've never seen a town that needed a little salutary insincerity so bad as this one. But what was it somebody meant?"

Rexford wasn't sure it was altogether prudent to pass on the news of his argument on the river road that morning; but after all Clay Sellers seemed to be interested in his welfare. There was no particular reason why Sellers should be interested in his welfare, of course, except Christian charity, and while that was strong enough to interest millions of people in massacred Armenians and starving Chinese it didn't seem likely that it would interest anybody in a floating laborer.

Yet Sellers was interested, and despite his admiration for insincerity his interest seemed genuine. So Rexford told him the story and was rewarded by a slowly growing grin.

"Yes," Sellers told him, "that was Herb Pence. The Crown Prince. And, I judge, his sister—they two and Blades and Ruth Hollis run around together a lot. One engagement announced and the other expected. And if Herb and Blades said run you out, Flint'll run you out.

"Hold on, now. Don't go huntin' trouble. You come inside for a minute or two. If you don't mind my askin' a few impertinent questions maybe I'll give you a little professional advice, free of charge; and maybe it will work out a little better than my ill-judged suggestion about Colonel Hollis's grass. As it happens, my friend, I don't like the people that run this town any better than they seem to like you; and besides I owe you some reparation for that mean trick I played you. If we can talk this thing over maybe we can figure out how to circumvent these Bladeses and Pences."

He led Rexford into the front office and carefully

pulled down the shades before he lit the gas in a lopsided and blackened Welsbach burner. Its soft light fell dimly on the ranks of battered law books in the shelves about the wall and threw friendly shadows on the shabbier corners of the big room. Yet the leather chairs, if worn, were deep and comfortable, and on the marble mantel over the fireplace stood a row of books that had nothing to do with the law. Rexford stopped to examine them and stayed to wonder.

A Bible, old style—a leather-bound King James Version with all the classic chapter headings—"the battle of four kings against five"; "the mutual love of Christ and His Church"; " moral virtues, and their contrary vices." Half a dozen of Shakespeare's plays, with Bacon's "Essays" beside them to show that there was no hard feeling. Herodotus, Plato's "Republic," Augustine's "City of God"—all these in the original. Then "The Education of Henry Adams," Unamuno's "Tragic Sense of Life," "Of Human Bondage," "Candide," the Arabian Nights, and Van Vechten's exhaustive volume on the cat.

From the books Rexford looked back to their owner.

"Looks like a shelf selected for a desert island," he remarked.

"It is. I've spent my whole life in Hollisburg."

"Ah!" said Rexford. "And I see you were born on the hill. What are you doing half a block from Main Street?"

Sellers chuckled.

"I'm not exactly on the best terms with the Cham-

ber of Commerce," he admitted, "but bein' a bachelor with no ambition I've got all I want, so they can't hurt me. They think I'm a bad citizen, and likely they're right. A few hundred people like me would ruin the town, or at least the hoorah boys that run it; but I'm in a minority of one, so I'm harmless. Now tell me about your afternoon."

Rexford told him everything—what had happened and what he thought about it and what he supposed the Hollises must have thought, rolling one cigarette after another as he let his feelings carry him away into a lament on the decay of old families, particularly old families with charming daughters.

"There's a good deal in your view of it," Sellers admitted when he had finished. "More than most folks here would admit. Because, you see, the Colonel's an old story with us. His ancestors settled the county and founded the town. His grandfather was a general in the Mexican War. His father was in Congress. But by the time they got down to Colonel O. P. M., the Hollises had about run out of genius, distinction, energy and the rest of the qualities they'd brought over the mountains from Virginia.

"Lord knows I'm no enthusiast for needless work. But the Hollises lost their money—so long ago that even I've forgotten when and how. Likely they're like d'Artagnan's ancestors, impoverished by the crusades. Anyway, by the time the Colonel was your age he ought to have known that it was time to go to work. But the Hollises hadn't had to work since they chased the Indians off the town site and

it was just plain too much for him. He never could bring himself to it."

"But doesn't he do anything? How do they live?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say he doesn't do anything. He's been writing a history of Hollis County for the last thirty years. Goes up and reads chapters of it to the State Historical Society now and then, or gets them printed in the Indianapolis papers. He's been a presidential elector and alternate to national conventions—all that on the strength of his name—and on the Governor's staff. That's where he got his title.

"How does he live? Well, I don't know how he figures it to himself, but I'll tell you how it is. He owns his house and a stretch of vacant lots on Whitcomb Street that would be good residential property, now the town's growin', if everybody hadn't got the itch to put up a bungalow in Pence's Addition. And he owns the Hollis Building. It's the finest historic ruin in the business district—worse even than this one. Whenever he needs money he plasters another mortgage on the Hollis Building or the house—Pence holds five or six of 'em. Mortgaged for twice what they're worth already and no chance he'll ever pay it off; he pays the interest on the last mortgage out of the principal of the next one. So you might say that our fine old gentleman—which he is—is practically livin' on the charity of Elmo Pence."

"How about his daughter?" asked Rexford. "She works."

"Yes, she keeps house—a nineteen-room house—and she keeps it spick and span. But we ain't sup-

posed to know that. Everybody in town knows it, of course, but the Hollises act as if it was a secret. They live way up there on the hill away from everybody and when Ruth sweeps and dusts she pulls down the shades so nobody'll see her. That's her father's doing, of course; she's got more sense. If they moved into a five-room bungalow in Pence's Addition she could keep house with hardly any work at all; but that would be comin' down in the world, and besides, the whole town could see her shakin' out the mop on the back porch. So you see the ignominy of work is a matter of theory more than of practice. It's a fact with the Colonel, but Ruth works like a truck horse so that he can go on bein' a fine old gentleman."

"Why does she do it?"

Sellers regarded his visitor gravely through the smoke clouds.

"Because she's a Hollis. Because she was born and raised on the hill. I've known her all her life and I don't doubt that her honest opinion of her father is about the same as mine; but she stands on the burning deck and won't even admit she smells smoke. Couldn't go away to college, though plenty of people would have lent her the money; it would have been admitting that the Hollises had come down in the world to take it. Makes her own clothes out of last year's and looks as good to me as Leila Pence that buys hers in New York; but she don't look as good to Leila Pence, nor to herself.

"Luckily, there's one way a poor but proud young lady can accept money without makin' any damaging admissions; and if she marries Herb Pence, as I

expect she will, why, it will be a sign that the Hollises have decided to come to terms with Destiny. That bein' the only reason a sensible girl like Ruth would marry a young pimmy-ammy like him. Elmo Pence would give 'em the mortgages for a wedding present, and the Colonel could go on being a fine old gentleman."

"It's a damn shame," said Rexford eventually.

"I kind of surmised you were a person of insight," Sellers admitted. "But that isn't why I've told you the history of the Hollis family. I told it to you because I can see you've come down in the world and ain't got used to it. And I thought maybe I could show you that there are worse things than coming down in the world: one of them bein' not to come down in the world when it's time to come."

VII.

Disintegration of an Old New Yorker.

"OH, I've come down," Rexford assured him. "I wouldn't say I like it, but I'm getting used to it."

"Hit bottom yet?"

Rexford grinned.

"Depends on how far down the bottom is. I've tried. I've never gone in for begging or burglary but I understand they're both skilled trades. My line is plain rough labor—unless I find somebody that wants an automobile mechanic, as your Mr. Blades doesn't."

"So you've hit bottom," Sellers repeated. "All right. Then you'll let me lend you carfare to Adamsville."

"No, I won't. Not that I know where Adamsville is, but it doesn't sound like a place I want to go to."

"In the main," said Sellers, "there isn't much to choose between Adamsville and Hollisburg—though my fellow citizens would lynch me if they heard me say it. There's just about one difference; Adamsville is twenty miles nearer New York."

"The answer is still no."

"Huh! I suppose you want me to lend you carfare to New York, then."

"I don't want you to lend me anything," said Rex-

ford, with an easy indifference that carried conviction. "I'm headed for New York but I mean to work my way. I don't have to get there for six weeks and in the meantime one place is about as good as another. In fact, if I could get a job I'd just about as soon spend a little more time in Hollisburg."

This statement, popping out suddenly, was a bigger surprise to Rexford even than to Sellers. Only this morning he had hated Hollisburg at sight. But this afternoon he had seen the hill streets; this evening he had dined in state with the Hollis family. In his knockabout life of the past year that was a large event. No reason to suppose it could happen again, to a floating laborer. Still——

"We'll have to get Flint off your neck before you can stay here," Sellers mused, "but I reckon I can attend to that. So you want some work, eh? All right. See those books?"

Rexford followed his glance to a corner where they lay in stacks, some still wrapped as they had come through the mails, others undone but still in paper jackets; piles of books, cubic yards of books, with dust lying thick on the farther heaps. Sellers chuckled.

"It ain't so bad as it looks. Books are my only vice. I buy 'em from catalogues and stack 'em up on the floor as they come—read the top ones off the pile now and then, but I never know what I've got a foot or two below the surface. I bought some new shelves last month but I been too blame lazy to sort 'em out.

"Now I take it you know something about books.

I imagine it would be about a week's work to sort these out and get 'em catalogued, and I could afford——"

"It would be about a day's work, and you know it," Rexford interrupted. "It's mighty good of you, but I don't need that kind of help. Couldn't take it, if I did. What I'm looking for is manual labor. Any kind."

Sellers projected two or three smoke clouds at the ceiling before he resumed.

"Any kind, eh? . . . If you want to stay in Hollisburg you'd better stay here with me. Ain't many others you'd find congenial, I imagine; certainly there ain't many others I find congenial. I owe you a good turn to make up for that mean trick I put up on you this afternoon; but aside from that, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is, I have an idea you and I'd be company for each other. And if you figure on staying in Hollisburg after the warnings you got from Blades and Herb Pence you'd better keep within reach of a counselor at law.

"Now I live in the back rooms of this old antique ruin. My uncle left it to me and since I can't sell it I make the best of it. Nigger woman comes in once a week to clean up, but in between times it could stand a little attention. What I really need——"

He looked solemnly at Rexford through the eddying smoke drifts.

"What I really need is a competent office boy. Somebody who would sweep out of mornings, brush the dust off the sidewalk now and then, water the grass in the side yard, chop wood for the bathroom heater—and who could and would catalogue books

in his spare moments and pretend to listen to me of evenings when I run off my random thoughts on the defects of the universe. For such a person I could afford to pay as much as two dollars a day; it would be a convenience to me as well as to him if he would lodge on the cot in the spare room upstairs; and durin' such times as we were engaged in philosophic argument I'd furnish the tobacco. Have you got down that far?"

Rexford thought it over, grinning.

"So long as you give me enough manual labor to do," he said presently, "I guess that meets the conditions. Consider your offer jumped at. I presume you furnish the broom."

"I do, and you're hired. And if anybody tries to lock up my laborious office boy on the charge of vagrancy we'll not only tell him where he gets off but see that he gets off there. Which is sometimes more difficult . . . And now will you kindly tell me why you're willin' to catalogue my books, and so forth, only on condition that you have to sweep out besides?"

Rexford took out of his pocket a worn and smudgy clipping from a New York newspaper.

"That tells all. The secret history of my noble birth. You see why I want to get back, but not too soon."

Sellers read:

REXFORD CUTS OFF GRANDSON

Bulk of Old New Yorker's Estate Goes to Union Theological Seminary

Practically all of the $3,000,000 estate left by Stuyvesant de Peyster Rexford, member of the well-known Rexford family of Murray Hill, who died July 21 last, has been left to the Research Laboratory of Pure and Applied Theology at Union Seminary, according to the will filed for probate yesterday by Henry F. Carpenter of 120 Broadway, the executor.

There are minor bequests to servants but the only surviving relative, Nicholas Rexford, a grandson, who is a student at Columbia, is cut off with one dollar, "which," says the will, "is more than he deserves."

A codicil, however, contains the following provision:

"But if for one year from the date of probate of this will my said grandson Nicholas Rexford shall have supported himself exclusively by manual labor, without recourse to loans or subventions in any form, I direct my executor to pay to him from the residuary estate the sum of $25,000. His word as to the fulfillment of this condition shall be accepted, for with all his faults he does not lie; but it shall be clearly understood that this bequest becomes effective only if he shall have supported himself by the sweat of his brow. I exclude the consideration of his earning a living by intellectual pursuits because I know he never could do it and would only be wasting his time if he tried."

Young Rexford, who is living at the Phi Chi fraternity house on West 115th Street, said that he would make no effort to break the will. "It was grandfather's money," he said, "and he had a right to do what he wanted with it. I am going out to look for a job."

Sellers handed the clipping back with a grunt.

"Vindictive old gentleman, wasn't he? From

three million to twenty-five thousand is quite a drop."

"So it is," Rexford admitted. "But all I've thought of lately is the difference between twenty-five thousand and that one lone silver dollar that I drew from the estate and threw as far as I could hurl it off Brooklyn Bridge. . . . Oh, well! I'd never been worth a hoot—that's the truth of the matter. I'd been a good deal of a thorn in grandfather's flesh, and when he and I were all that was left of the family he naturally thought that when he was gone it would be all gone."

"Yes," Sellers broke in, "but why did he go and inflict this cruel and unusual punishment on you? He couldn't——"

"That's just why," said Rexford with a grin. "It was the cruelest punishment he could think of. You see, grandfather was an old New Yorker. You know the definition of an old New Yorker? A man who graduated from Columbia College, belongs to the Union Club, inherited his money and has never worked. That was grandfather. That's been the history of most of the Rexfords. The old ancestral farm was around where Park Avenue and 50th Street is now. That helped a lot. . . .

"Of course grandfather really worked like a dog, sometimes. He belonged to a lot of hospital boards and charity committees and was a trustee of Columbia and all that, and I suppose he averaged about as hard a working day as a lot of vice presidents and general managers. But he never earned a dollar in his life. Didn't need to. And I didn't see why I'd ever need to either. It seemed to be the only duty

of a Rexford to spend the income of the estate so I tried to qualify; only I was more interested in horses than in hospitals and in stud poker than in social work. Grandfather and I happened to have different tastes and he got to be rather intolerant about it, in time. So he figured that the meanest thing he could do for me was to make me work for a living."

"He was right," Sellers sighed. "Speakin' as one who has worked for a living for some twenty years or more, I will say that the old gentleman's intuition was pretty keen. But how do you come to be lookin' for a job out here in Hollis County? It's a long way from New York."

"That's why. I could have got a job as a taxi driver, I suppose, but I didn't like to be picked up and tipped by girls I used to dance with. Oh, I had some grand ideas then. Get as far away as possible from people who might try to lend me money, for fear I'd crack under the strain. Travel—see the country not from a Pullman window, but from the under side. Well, I've seen it."

"Have you just gone around lookin' for odd jobs?"

"Oh, I've done nearly everything. My first idea—I used to be a pretty good tennis player, and I figured I could stall around from one tournament to another for the biggest part of the year, getting my expenses paid. But then I got to thinking. Of course most tennis amateurs do live on their tennis, about half the time, unless they've got enough money to live by clipping coupons; but it seemed to

me it would be kind of bad for the game if a probate court set down a formal decision that an amateur tennis player and tournament hound was really earning his living by manual labor. So I gave that up. And it was good for me. Ten months ago I could play tennis pretty well and polo a little and stud pretty badly, and that was all. But now I'm a passable horse wrangler, something of a street cleaner, a little bit of a lumberjack and almost an expert farm hand. I'm tough and hard and used to getting up early, and when I turn up at 120 Broadway on the fifteenth of September to crawl back into the middle class this year will look like a romantic adventure. But it looked like hell, usually, while I was at it."

"What do you figure on doin' with this money when you get it?"

Rexford lit another cigarette and looked for his future in the smoke clouds.

"There you have me," he admitted. "I'd intended to go from college into a broker's office—not that I wanted to, but most of my friends were going down to Wall Street and I wanted to stick with the gang. But I've got out of that notion now. The stock market is only glorified stud and I've realized I haven't got brains enough for stud. Whatever I do I'm afraid I'm finished as an old New Yorker. I had to quit Columbia College before I graduated; I can't afford the Union even if I'm still on the waiting list; I didn't inherit any money and I've worked. I've been disqualified all along the line. But New York's a big place and there are a lot of people in it

besides old New Yorkers. I didn't see much of them when I lived there, but I've got a kind of curiosity to look at them now.

"Not that it matters much. No place looks very good when you're doing manual labor but I've seen a lot of towns that would be attractive to a man with twenty-five thousand dollars. . . . But you see why I want to earn it, even by cutting grass and sweeping out."

Sellers knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Well, friend Rexford, it will give me some pleasure to be the only citizen of Hollisburg who knows that you're really a fairy prince in disguise. For everybody else you're only the Beast. Don't forget that when Beauty saunters past. . . . Except—— Let me see that clipping again."

He reread it with a widening grin.

"Curious," he said at last. "Very curious. You may have had a few slings and arrows from outrageous fortune in the past year, friend Rexford, but this time your luck was with you. So you're a Phi Chi?"

He spoke a phrase that would have been meaningless, even ridiculous, to the profane; but it meant something to Nick Rexford, who gave him the proper answer, turning over his coat lapel as he did so to show the hidden pin.

"I guess you belong," Sellers admitted. "Very curious. For, as it happens, Hollisburg is a Phi Chi town. Most everybody that is anybody, including me who am nobody, comes from the State University chapter, except Herb Pence who went to Cornell. Socially and commercially every Phi Chi that comes

to Hollisburg finds his fortune made and all wrapped up for him."

"Even if he comes on foot looking for odd jobs?"

"Might happen even then, though I admit you've got a bad start. Fit you out in some new clothes and even Herb Pence would probably offer to lend you money."

"I don't want to borrow money and I can't afford new clothes. I didn't join the fraternity to use it as a meal ticket."

"Well, before we try to swing anything by fraternal favor let's see what we can do with our legal rights. Suppose we go down to the lunch counter and have it out with Flint."

They went out into Poplar Street, dark save where gaps in the leafy curtain let down broad splashes from the high-swung arc lights, and turned away from the dazzling brightness of Main Street into deeper shadow.

"You're running my business better than I could run it," Rexford admitted, "but I'd like to know why you're going away from the lunch counter."

"Oh, we'll get to Dan's presently. 'S long as you're goin' to be with us for a while you might as well get initiated into the customs of Hollisburg. All of us oldtimers go down and take a drink from the blue-lick well before we go to bed of nights. That's how we cheat the graveyard. Here—back in the shadow. You can't see it but you can hear it."

"And smell it," said Rexford, stumbling through the dimness of a vacant lot toward the kiosk from which came the trickle of splashing water and a terrible stench as of ten million rotten eggs. "Do you

mean to say this stuff gives you long life? You earn it."

"The fountain of youth," Sellers rebuked him. He was leaning against one of the posts that supported a small pointed roof over an iron pipe; from its faucet, waist-high, a stream of water poured into a lime-incrusted iron basin. "Some bring their cups; some use the community dipper; but we old residents stick our heads under the faucet. If you cut yourself when you shaved this morning this stuff will disinfect you."

Rexford duly thrust his face at the stream, caught some of it in his mouth and more on his forehead, hair and shirt, and came out spluttering in a fearful reek of hydrogen sulphide.

"If your police don't run me out now," he grunted, "they have no sense of public decency."

"Oh, no," said Sellers. "You're one of us now. We can all recognize you as a fellow citizen a block away."

"Yes, but these are the only clothes I happen to possess. Sold the others in Kansas City; had to eat. And now these will have to be buried."

"Not a bit. Our cleaners are used to gettin' the blue-lick aroma out, for those that are particular enough to want it removed. I'll send your suit out in the morning."

"And let me dress like Apollo till it comes back, I suppose."

"Why, if I had a pedestal to stand you on I suppose I could powder you up to look like a statue; but then you couldn't do much to them stacks of books. No, Rexford, you and I are about of a size——"

"Now if you think I'll wear your clothes," Rexford broke in, "when you're overpaying me for my work and putting me up——"

"Durn it, you hired to work for me and take my orders. And my first order is to look fitten around the office, even if you have to wear my clothes. No, don't you go thinkin' I'll make you wear out my old suits. I'm goin' to make you wear my new ones—the clothes I buy for my annual trip to Chicago. I'm too lazy to put 'em on around home. Maybe you think you'd look better without 'em, but a respectable law office is no place for Apollos."

"Oh, let up on Apollo," Rexford grunted. "That isn't my name."

Sellers laughed softly.

"I don't reckon your name's Nemesis, is it? No? Let's move on to Dan Cullen's."

VIII.

Who's Who in Hollisburg: and Who Is Not.

THERE was mirth and melody that night in the home of St. Elmo Pence, but not in the same room. The melody was going on in the parlor, where the light of parchment-shaded lamps, bracketed on the tapestried walls, fell softly on the busily working keys of a grand piano. Paderewski was giving Chopin absent treatment, via an electric switch; but nobody was listening to Paderewski and Chopin.

Herb Pence was downtown playing bridge at the Chamber of Commerce. Leila, mistress of the household since her mother's death, was swinging lazily in a Gloucester hammock at one end of the long screened porch, burbling with soft laughter at the conversation of George Blades; and farther down the porch, in wicker armchairs, St. Elmo Pence talked and B. F. Crisler listened.

Mr. Crisler had been listening to St. Elmo Pence for the better part of the past ten hours and he was beginning to feel a yearning for silence.

An hour in Pence's bank; conversation with the officers, the employees, the directors who dropped in as if by chance; an hour on the floor above with the officers and directors of Pence's real estate corporation and flood-insurance company; a trip around the

town and through the nearby country in Pence's limousine, with Pence giving him the history, assessed valuation and probable market value of every piece of property they passed; dinner at Pence's, lavish and rather surprisingly formal for a family affair; and now this long session with Pence on the porch.

It hadn't been wasted, for in B. F. Crisler's business nothing was wasted. Before he arrived that morning St. Elmo Pence had been only a name on his letter of introduction; but now he had packed away in his head a pretty complete history of Pence and of Hollisburg. Indeed, you could read that history in Pence's face—a jaw that spread out right and left and forward far beyond the rest of his features; a hard heavy nose hooked forward over an iron-gray mustache; glittering gray eyes under bushy iron-gray brows. Obviously this man could crash through the weak spineless mass of his fellow citizens like a brick through a crate of eggs.

But all this Mr. Crisler had gathered in the first half hour and now he wanted a rest. He wanted it, among other reasons, to get time to think up answers to questions about his sanitarium; for on that topic the eager interest of Hollisburg's up-and-coming business men had brought him pretty near the end of his rope.

So when Pence offered him another cigar he said that he would have to be going back to the hotel.

"You're determined to stay at the Pershing House?" Pence demanded in a tone which made it plain that this was an interference with the will of Pence which Mr. Crisler was likely to regret.

"You've seen the hot, stuffy, noisy room you'll get there. I've saved a room for you upstairs that's as big as the city park. And service, man! If you'd ever lived in a small town you'd appreciate my three colored boys. You won't find their equals in any club in Chicago."

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Pence," Crisler admitted, wiping his spectacles. "But the fact is I'm troubled a good deal with insomnia. Very often I have to get up in the middle of the night and put on my clothes and walk the streets for a couple of hours before I can get back to sleep. That wouldn't do in a respectable household. You'd wake up and shoot me for a burglar."

Pence chuckled.

"Hollisburg hasn't had a burglary in five years. Virtually no crime of any sort, since prohibition."

"Prohibition?" Crisler asked, glancing at the empty glasses on the table between them.

"Oh, well," Pence laughed, "you and I can be trusted not to abuse this stuff. George Blades' partner gets it for me and for one or two other people. I don't know what connection he may have with the distributors, of course; and I never ask, Mr. Crisler. I never ask. Better have another before you go."

"No, I think not. So you're free from crime. Well, that's quite a point in favor of Hollisburg. I hear that Adamsville and Vernon can't say as much."

"They certainly can't, Mr. Crisler. If you've seen the statistics of automobiles stolen in those towns—I'll have the secretary of the Chamber send

them to you to-morrow—you'll realize that they have a real criminal class. Frank Flint has cleaned all that out in Hollisburg. Safest town you'd want to find anywhere. Add that to our unequaled situation, our splendid mineral water with its curative properties—— You haven't tried it yet, have you?"

He pushed a bell and a white-coated negro appeared.

"A couple of glasses of blue lick, Jim, and a bottle for Mr. Crisler. Now, Mr. Crisler, I'll give you a slip with the chemical formula according to an analysis by the State Chemist's office—make your own, of course, to check up on it—and if you can find anything like it in Adamsville or Vernon, or French Lick for that matter——"

"Oh, I've heard of the merits of your water," said Crisler. Twenty people had brought up the topic at the banquet. "But you understand this is just a preliminary trip to look over the country. I'll have to scout all along the valley——"

"And remember that my limousine is at your disposal every day. The children will have to get along with their little cars."

"Why, that's very good of you, Mr. Pence——"

"Not at all, not at all——"

"But I'd a little rather pick up a second hand Ford and run it myself," Crisler finished with surprising firmness. "I may want to look around on some roads that your big car could hardly manage —for even here in Hollis County, Mr. Pence, I suppose you must have a few bad roads. I'll make a deal with Mr. Blades in the morning——"

"Make it to-night—he'll be going downtown pretty soon; likely he'd be glad to talk things over with you. He and Leila are as matter-of-fact as a married couple—he never stays after ten."

"Now, dad," Leila's lazy voice drifted up the porch, "don't you go slandering us to Mr. Crisler. I've heard every word you said."

But her father's next remark was in a confidential undertone.

"And when you're looking over Hollis County, Mr. Crisler, by all means don't forget to make a closer inspection of the old Miller place. You remember—I showed it to you from the bend in the road this afternoon. Right on the edge of the bluffs overlooking the valley and the town—finest air, finest view that you'll find in twenty miles up and down the river. Right on the State road, easy water connection from the reservoir south of town—I don't see where you could find a better location for your sanitarium.

"There's about a hundred acres in it. Maybe you wouldn't need that much. I had to take it over in foreclosure a couple of years ago and I've got a lazy tenant on there that doesn't produce more than enough to pay taxes. Lord knows what he lives on; but I've been too busy to turn him out and put in a better worker. I could let go of the part along the edge of the hill and join up the rest with some other property of mine right next to it. And I don't mind telling you in confidence, Mr. Crisler, that I'll let you have all or part of that farm twenty-five per cent below the assessed valuation. Hollisburg has

done a good deal for me and I'm willing to do this much to bring your institution to Hollisburg."

"That's a very generous offer, Mr. Pence."

"Well, I'm one of these restless fellows; like to see something done and done right. If other people would do it I'd let them; but I've learned from experience that I generally have to lead. And then these old hard-shells up on the hill get their backs up and won't follow. It's just possible that the entry of some outside capital now, such as your syndicate represents, might loosen some of them up. And that would be a good thing for all of us, in the long run."

So there was money in the town that Pence hadn't been able to reach. Mr. Crisler didn't see that this fact was of any particular importance to him, but he put it away carefully in his memory; for anything might turn out to be useful later on. Even if it wasn't useful, it was curious; Pence didn't seem to be the sort of man from whom a dollar could hide.

But Mr. Crisler veiled these reflections with the remark that he would have to be getting back to the hotel to see if he could go to sleep. Pence let him go with reluctance; and when at last they had risen, and Crisler had picked up his hat, he was halted for a final piece of advice.

"When you pick Hollisburg for your site, Mr. Crisler—and we know you'll pick Hollisburg after you've looked over the field—you'll probably need some legal advice from time to time. I recommend Sammons & Blythe—best firm in town. They handle all my business; and between you and me, they have connections with the courthouse crowd—they and I

—well, you know these things are useful sometimes. Bear them in mind."

"I will," Crisler promised as Leila Pence came down the veranda to see him off, George Blades' long, colorless face looming over her shoulder. There was a complacent little smile—as always—on her pretty face, the smile of a girl who is only plump and doesn't quite realize that some day she is going to be frankly and unalterably fat. She took Blades' arm with one hand and laid another on her father's shoulder.

"Well, dad, I hope you've converted Mr. Crisler into a permanent settler. George and I would have come down to help you sell him the Hollisburg idea if we'd thought you needed us."

"Listen to her," said the beaming father. "Best little Hollisburg booster of us all. Lord help me, they say I run the town, but Leila runs me; and pretty soon she's going to marry Blades——"

He didn't add, "And then Blades will run the town." Nobody said it, but evidently all four of them thought it at the same time; and St. Elmo Pence became suddenly silent, while the smile of paternal pride very gradually faded out. He hadn't considered that.

Leila's smile, however, couldn't be erased; and Blades saved the situation by coming in with a quiet:

"And then she'll run me, too, and make me like it." But Mr. Crisler surmised that no woman—least of all Leila—would ever manage George Blades.

Then, as they gradually passed from the momen-

tary constraint into the exchange of formal good nights, heavy feet stumbled up the steps and Herb Pence thrust his way into the group, hot and blowing.

"Dad, something has got to be done about Clay Sellers. Of all the damned impudence——"

Crisler noted the curious frown that ran across St. Elmo Pence's face as he squared his shoulders—a frown in which a little apprehension seemed to blend with a great deal of annoyance.

"What's he done?"

"There was a hobo," Herb spluttered. "I passed him on the road comin' back from the club this morning, and told him to walk around Hollisburg. You remember, Leila—you, too, George. Instead of that he came right in town and began asking people for work."

Blades nodded.

"He asked me for a job," he admitted. "I told him to move on, too."

"Well, he didn't move. He'd left a leather dressing case at Cullen's lunch counter—anybody could see he stole it; and Flint was waiting there to pinch him to-night. A little while back who strolls in but this hobo—Rexford, he says his name is—with Clay Sellers. And when Flint reaches out to grab this fellow for vagrancy Sellers says he hired him as office boy. I was there—so was your man Rufe, George. I told Sellers what happened this morning; and he—he laughed. Damned impudent shyster——"

"How about this dressing case?" Blades interrupted. "You said he'd stolen it."

"I said he must have stolen it. Anybody could see it didn't fit his clothes; but he said it was his and Sellers said he was not only this fellow's employer but his counsel; and Flint wilted. He must have figured that Sellers was too smart for him to fool with."

"Well, a man isn't a vagrant when he's an office boy," the elder Pence admitted. "But Sellers needs an office boy about as much as I need a guardian."

Blades wasn't smiling now.

"Sellers," said B. F. Crisler. "Was that the lawyer you mentioned to me, Mr. Pence?"

Mr. Pence, having met Crisler only that morning, couldn't be expected to know that he never forgot either names or faces.

"No, I spoke of Sammons & Blythe. This Sellers is a lazy, pettifogging, cantankerous sort of fellow —always making trouble for the progressive element."

"Then of course he isn't on good terms with the —er—courthouse crowd. Yet he seems too smart for the police."

"Oh, he's smart," Pence conceded. "But quite out of sympathy with the better elements. . . . Now, Mr. Crisler, try some of this water. If it doesn't help your insomnia then our experience is worth nothing. Why, Mr. Crisler, it's good for everything. The well belongs to the city, too; and if your organization decides to locate here I can promise you that you can draw on it as much as you want, at a purely nominal rental. If you have any trouble, I'll see to the city council; and"—he laughed genially—

"you won't even have to give me a block of stock for it."

Crisler was afraid he might have to show his good faith by drinking some of the water on the spot; but he got away at last and walked downtown with George Blades. It appeared that Mr. Blades had no second hand Fords and Mr. Crisler eventually decided to rent a new one from the local Ford agency, Blades promising his influence and that of Pence if there were any difficulty over the terms. Blades, too, lived at the Pershing House, but he was going on to the garage; so they parted at the hotel and Mr. Crisler went upstairs to try to get some sleep, wishing with all his heart that St. Elmo Pence had never given him the keys of the city. It had made a number of things much harder for B. F. Crisler.

While George Blades, with quickened steps, went on to the garage to hear from Rufe the repeated story of Flint's backdown before Sellers and his office boy.

"And that ain't all," Rufe finished. "This Rexford went home with him; Sellers says he's goin' to let him sleep in the attic so's he can take care of the premises. You get that?"

"I get it. Not much doubt what premises he's going to take care of."

"Not a bit. And Sellers is just the man that would be picked out—looks bad, George."

"Something else looks bad," said Blades. "Pence is trying to sell the Miller place to this fellow Crisler —you know, the bird that's looking for a sanitarium site. So you've got to tell Raney there's nothing

doing for the next week or so. If this Crisler goes to prowling around——"

"Raney can fix things," Rufe declared. "Good enough, anyway, for somebody that's only lookin' for a sanitarium site. But if anybody was lookin' for something else—George, you've got to make Pence attend to this Rexford."

"You darn fool, how can I put Pence up to anything now that Flint's fallen down? Pence has always been careful. You know if he gets leery——"

He paused.

"Yes," Rufe encouraged him. "If he gets leery, what do we do then?"

"Why," Blades supplied with a chilly smile, "we move on, taking our sheaves with us. As we've done before."

Rufe's cross-firing eyes glowed malevolently.

"As we've done before—but this time things are different. You're playin' your own game with the Pences, where I can't sit in. Bridge parties and dinner dances at the Country Club; all Rufe is good for to them people is a little bootleggin'. And gettin' ready to get married, and all. If you let me down, George——"

Blade's pale, unblinking eyes stopped him.

"I can take care of myself, Rufe—even against you. But no use cuttin' each other's throats. Why shouldn't I get married? We're both progressive business men, Rufe; good and settled down. I could have been mayor if I'd had time to give to the job."

"Yeh," said Rufe. "That was good."

"So," Blades concluded, "we needn't ride each

other. What we want to do is to figure out how to get Mr. Sellers and his office boy."

"Yeh," Rufe agreed. "And we want to do it quick."

IX.

A Crowned Head Lies Uneasy.

FOR all Nick Rexford's amazing luck and unexpected security he slept badly that night. It was hot and stuffy in the upper half story of Sellers' old brick house, and though the cot was as comfortable as anything Rexford had slept on for a year, he lay half awake for hours listening to the blended unceasing noises from the busy garage across the street—the honk of cars arriving, the purr and rattle of cars departing, the incessant tap-tap of hammers on metal in the sheds behind.

Perhaps it was the noise that kept him awake, perhaps his speculations on Clay Sellers who had taken him up and given him shelter, comfort and companionship for no intelligible reason. Rexford would work for his pay, but Sellers was overpaying him none the less. He didn't need an office boy nor a librarian. He might have taken Rexford in because he wanted company, but the reason didn't seem altogether plausible. He might have done it from pure charity, but Rexford's experience made him doubt that. He might have some dark reason of his own.

Speculating on this, Rexford eventually fell asleep, his dimming consciousness full of jumbled images—Henry F. Carpenter reading him the will and adding

some offensive and unnecessary remarks about the prodigal son, and husks, and swine; wheat fields baking under the Kansas sun; icy streets in Chicago, with Rexford one of a mob laboring with pick and shovel; Colonel Hollis putting up a front at his dinner table; Herb Pence, fat and red and infuriated, weakening as his girl laughed behind him; white arms sweeping in long rhythmic strokes that made a fine art of washing windows——

Then dreamless unconsciousness, from which the rattling alarm clock woke him at half past six. And he had swept the office and the sidewalk, burned the contents of the wastebasket in the gutter under Rufe's malignant glances from across the street, watered the lawn and dusted the furniture before Clay Sellers appeared and told him that it was time to go down to the lunch counter for breakfast.

"I don't know why you should give me food when you pay me wages," Rexford protested as he put on his hat—or rather Clay Sellers' hat, his last year's straw. Both the hat and the clothes looked a good deal better on Rexford than they had looked on their owner.

"Because I blame well choose to," said Sellers. "I want to show you Colonel Hollis ain't the only one that can entertain a visitor to Hollisburg and that St. Elmo Pence ain't the only one that can give a stranger the keys of the city. Also because some people here would evidently like to feed you strychnine, and I'm curious to find out why."

Rexford couldn't believe that, couldn't understand why anybody in Hollisburg should be interested in

him now that he was an honest office boy instead of a suspected hobo. Yet, even then, Nick Rexford had already occasioned anxious thoughts to no less a person than St. Elmo Pence.

Mr. Pence, too, had spent a bad night. He had gone to bed under the irritation of his son's querulous complaints against this impertinent tramp who had dared to insult him in the hearing of George Blades—and of Ruth Hollis, though Herb hadn't mentioned that; against Clay Sellers, enemy of law and order, who introduced bad characters into the town and lent them the support of his legal knowledge; against Flint, the craven officer who had let Sellers bluff him out. St. Elmo Pence at first hadn't shared his son's animosity against these persons, but he found himself facing a fact that grew more disturbing every moment—the fact that Herb had come to his father instead of settling this thing himself.

For a long time Pence had passed over his son's shortcomings with the easy observation that the boy would learn as he got into things; but there were some elements of leadership, evidently, that the boy would never learn. Herb would inherit a million or so; as majority stockholder he would become president of the bank, of which he was already second vice president; his money would make him a big man in Hollisburg. But the autocratic Pence dynasty would die with its founder.

For the first half hour after he went to bed it was this uncomfortable fact that tormented Mr. Pence; after that he began to worry over the equally plain and equally unpleasant reflection that the dynasty

wouldn't die out. Hollisburg would still be a one-man town when he was gone, but the one man would be George Blades.

St. Elmo Pence knew his daughter as well as he knew his son. They both took after their mother. Leila was as weakly amiable as Herb was weakly provocative. She would be putty in the hands of this pale-faced, pale-eyed, inscrutable George Blades, who had come to town—from California, it was understood—a couple of years before and already had beaten his way into the front rank of the men who managed Hollisburg. Once in control of the money that Leila Pence would inherit, Blades would rule alone. If he needed to do it he could manage Herb as easily as he would manage Leila.

Until this struck him St. Elmo Pence had always admired Blades. He was a brisk, busy, up-and-coming business man with plenty of good ideas and lots of pep. What else was he? He danced well, played a good hand of bridge and a respectable game of poker, knew how to talk to the women. He worked hard in his garage and made an amazing lot of money. What else? Nobody knew. Of his past, of his feelings, of the aspirations that lay behind those pale unblinking eyes nobody knew anything. Not even St. Elmo Pence, who ought to know all about the man who was going to marry his daughter and step into his shoes. But it was too late to ask now. He had accepted Blades on his Chamber of Commerce record and his standing as a business man who made money and put it in the bank. He couldn't go behind the returns.

Yet he wished he knew more about Blades, and

about Rufe, who had come to town and picked up a job in Blades' garage a week after it opened and had been a sort of misshapen shadow of his boss ever since. Rufe ran the garage when Blades was out in local society. Rufe got the bonded Bourbon which Blades passed around to a few carefully selected friends. Rufe had no friends; he stuck to the shop. There was no occasion for anybody to dislike him unless—as was reasonable—they disliked his looks. Still St. Elmo Pence wondered just what sort of establishment Leila was going to marry.

Herb, now, would marry Ruth—the daughter of that pompous old dead-beat up on the hill—and if her sour face and taciturnity meant anything she would make him uncomfortable. That was Herb's affair. He had asked for it. And yet St. Elmo Pence knew that marriage with the Hollises would add something to the dignity even of his own imperial line.

Ridiculous, the feeling Hollisburg still cherished, even if furtively, for its eponymous family. Even at this ceremony at the station to-day which welcomed B. F. Crisler, Colonel Hollis had had to be present and prominent. St. Elmo Pence had presented the keys of the city; the Hollises had held those keys once but had let them slip from pure incapacity and St. Elmo Pence had picked them up. Nevertheless, local sentiment would have felt that something was wrong if Colonel Hollis hadn't been present too, to lend the prestige of ancient authority to the reception.

Yes, the old superstitious respect still lived. Herb would find it out; Herb's wedding would bring it

out into the open. The son of the man who had made the town would marry the daughter of the family which had let it slide into decay, and everybody—not only the old families on the hill, but the street-corner loafers, even the business men who cheered most heartily for the new ways of Elmo Pence—would say that he had married well.

Altogether, Mr. Pence wasn't getting the satisfaction out of life that a constructive business man and civic patriot had a right to expect. And since he couldn't remake his son's character at this late date, or investigate George Blades' past after he had slapped him on the back and welcomed him into the family, his resentment transferred itself from his son and his future son-in-law to the men who had set him thinking about these unpleasant topics.

Clay Sellers—Pence despised and distrusted Clay Sellers, yet Clay Sellers survived. He was lazy; he was unprogressive; he was cantankerous. But he was a smart lawyer; so smart that he now and then supplemented his steady but slender income from the law business of the old families on the hill with a big case from one of the leading citizens of the new generation. They turned to Sellers only in desperation, but he usually won; he had even beaten Sammons & Blythe. And for a long time St. Elmo Pence had felt a faint remote uneasiness because there was one man in Hollisburg who openly despised him and his theories of life and still made a living. It was unnatural; it was an affront to the deity who had made St. Elmo Pence and must be proud of him.

Why should Sellers need an office boy? Obviously,

he didn't. Why should he take up with and protect a tramp who had been told to keep out of town? Something wrong about this; something secret and suspicious. Pence would have to find out about that in the morning; Sellers mustn't think he could turn Hollisburg over to the criminal classes. . . . But shortly after this sleep caught Mr. Pence off his guard, and a fine morning and a good breakfast sent him down to the bank in a cheerful mood which had no room for Clay Sellers.

Nor, in spite of Herb's dismal frowns, did he think about him again till lunch time, when he and Herb went up to the Chamber of Commerce with Jim Harby, the cashier, and found that Blades had saved places for them at the corner table. The four often lunched together and exchanged gossip of the morning; so it wasn't unnatural that Blades should presently make the casual observation that he had seen Sellers' new office boy sweeping out this morning.

"He worked like a bo who needed his handout bad," Blades added. "And it looks as if he got it. Sellers took him down to Cullen's for breakfast; and I hear he sleeps on the place, too. You'd think Sellers had hired him for a night watchman. Must have a bad conscience or something."

"I tell you, that fellow's a crook," Herb burst in. "I ought to have beat up on him yesterday; that would have sent him on his way without any trouble. But because the girls were there I didn't like to make a fuss."

"Lucky you didn't," said Blades sardonically, "if he's under Sellers' wing. I'd let him alone, Herb."

From the next table Cal Truman called across to them:

"Who's this you're talkin' about? Sellers' office boy? Say, it's queer about that fellow. He's got a Phi Chi pin."

"What?" All the lunchers within earshot sat up and listened.

"He certainly has. I stopped in at the tailor shop this morning to see if Pete had a suit of mine cleaned yet and he showed me one that Sellers had just sent down. Belonged to this tramp—stained and dirty and a devil of a mess altogether. But under the coat lapel was a sure-enough Phi Chi pin. 'I see it's like the one you wear, Mr. Truman,' says Pete, 'so I thought I'd ask you if I'd ought to send it back to him right away or wait till the suit's done?' So I took a good look at it. Nicholas Rexford is the name on the back—Columbia, '24."

"Rexford," said Blades. "That's the name he gave when Flint lit on him last night."

"Must have stolen the pin," said Herb. "Likely the suit too."

"He doesn't look like a tramp," said young Norman Kane stoutly. "I saw him at the lunch counter this morning. He had on some decent clothes and he looked like a regular guy."

St. Elmo Pence frowned, and a number of other people frowned in sympathy. Norman Kane was only a sophomore at the state university and wasn't supposed to know anything about anything. But Jim Harby, who owned a little property and dared to have a few opinions of his own even if he did

work for Pence, came unexpectedly to his rescue with a new line of argument.

"Whatever this boy may be," he observed, "Sellers is a good Phi Chi. He gave two hundred dollars for the new chapter house at Bloomington—biggest piece of money he ever let go of in his life, I guess. He wouldn't take in a man with a stolen pin."

"If he knew," Herb grunted. "Something mighty queer about this."

Somebody had to clear up the situation, and St. Elmo Pence was used to clearing up whatever situations were situated in Hollisburg.

"I'll attend to this," he announced. "I'll speak to Sellers about it myself. If this man's a thief I take it that even Sellers would permit the law to take its course."

A chuckle floated in from the doorway.

"There ain't many lawyers deserve such a compliment," Clay Sellers observed, grinning at the crowd. There fell a great silence. Sellers, though he belonged to the Chamber of Commerce, didn't take lunch there once a year. He flaunted his preference for Dan Cullen's. Yet to-day he had come for lunch, evidently with a purpose. He was calm enough, too; he found a place alone, at the bottom of the long central table, and poured himself a glass of water before he asked:

"Who's this thief you're speakin' of, Mr. Pence?"

St. Elmo Pence cleared his throat and his beak nose seemed to creep a little nearer to his undershot jaw.

"Sellers, who is this young fellow you call your

office boy? I have good reason for asking you——"

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Pence, though I can't imagine what it is. His name's Rexford—Nicholas Rexford."

"Where does he come from and why is he here?"

"Why, as to that," said Sellers, assailing a plate of beans and looking up between mouthfuls, "he's here to work. And he come here, immediately, from the water tank west of town. He was en route from some place to some place else when they threw him off a freight, and he had to walk in. Anyway, that's what he tells me."

"I don't suppose he's a Phi Chi?" Pence persisted.

"What?" Sellers swallowed another mouthful of beans. "Oh, yes, he's a Phi Chi. I tested him."

"Are you sure?"

"Test him yourself if you don't believe me."

"I don't belong to the fraternity," said Pence stiffly.

"That's so," Sellers apologized. "I forgot you never went to college. So maybe you don't understand just the way we college men feel in a case like this. Well, let Jim Harby there test him; or Herb."

There was a moment of silence while Hollisburg's business men looked at each other uncertainly. Then Cal Truman spoke up:

"Well, tell him he left his pin in that suit he sent down to Pete's to be cleaned. Pete showed it to me this morning."

St. Elmo Pence recognized the beginning of a moral stampede.

"What's he doing in Hollisburg?" he asked in a tone which tried to be genially, even hospitably, curious about a prospective resident.

"Workin' for me."

"Do you know anything about him?" Pence persisted. "Really know it, I mean?"

Sellers straightened up and looked at him reproachfully.

"Mr. Pence, it's enjoined in the ritual of our fraternity to lend aid to brothers in distress without askin' 'em impertinent questions. For all I know Rexford may be on the road because he's writin' a book on sociology. It's been done, and there are certainly things in Hollisburg that would amuse a sociologist. Or he may have other reasons. Anyway, I ain't bothered him with pryin' questions because brothers are supposed to act in a fraternal manner. If you don't believe me, ask anybody around town that got his job, and holds it, because he's a Phi Chi."

A number of people hurriedly lost interest in the conversation and returned to their food; but young Norman Kane, who wouldn't have to hunt a job for two years, and who took his fraternal duties more seriously because he was still in college, put in when he saw that Pence had no more to say:

"Well, Clay, as long as he's one of us you might as well take him around and introduce him to the gang. I guess none of us that fired a furnace for our room rent in college, or slung hash to pay for our board, care whether he's your office boy or the only son of your rich uncle."

Mr. Pence perceived that this was the general sen-

timent, and like most leaders he led largely by virtue of knowing when to let his followers lead him. He dropped the subject and returned to conversation with Herb and Blades and Jim Harby. But Sellers knew Pence hadn't lost interest. He couldn't lose interest when he had been beaten in his own town.

X.

Eccentric Conduct of a Lady.

THAT night the weekly dance at the Country Club brought out all the young people of Hollisburg and a few of the older ones who danced well enough to have kept it up after the craze of a decade earlier had passed. Herb Pence and Ruth Hollis arrived a little after nine in the bright blue car and attached themselves to a group which had collected during an intermission on the wide veranda overhanging the river. And here was Leila, who had driven out earlier with George Blades; and she greeted Ruth with——

"Well, I suppose Herb's told you all about his tramp?"

"His tramp?" Ruth asked, for since she had had Rexford as a dinner guest she had been thinking of him as her tramp.

"The one we passed in the road yesterday. My hat, hasn't he told you? Why, it's all over town."

Ruth glanced at Herb, who stood frowning, with his hands in his pockets.

"It takes news a long time to get up on the hill," she said lightly, "and Herb didn't tell me. What about his tramp?"

"Why," Leila began, delighted at this unexpected chance to tell the story all over, "it seems he's a

Phi Chi from Columbia. His name's Rexford. He's working for Clay Sellers, or at any rate living with Clay Sellers—Sellers calls him his office boy, but I guess that's just kidding. Anyway he's beating his way across country doing odd jobs so that he can write a book about sociology. Sellers said so himself. Isn't it thrilling?"

Ruth nodded. It certainly was—for she suspected that a writer on sociology might find a good deal of interest in the Hollis household.

"Norman Kane and some of the others went around to see him this afternoon," Leila went on, "and they say he's all right. Funny sort of fellow, Norman says; didn't talk about his book; says he's just Sellers' office boy. But he lives in New York and he's going back there this fall. Norman asked him to come out to the dance to-night, but he said he was too tired. You know I thought when we passed him in the road that he didn't look like a real tramp—didn't you?"

"Why, I didn't think much about him," Ruth admitted. "But he had supper with us last night——"

"What?" Leila gasped; and Herb gasped too. Over Leila's shoulder George Blades was looking at her with sardonic speculation; and Ruth surmised that he must have known why Rexford had climbed the hill. So she added hastily:

"We didn't know who he was—father picked him up on Main Street and sent him up to cut the grass. He'd been trying to get somebody for weeks, but all the men that used to do odd jobs have gone to work in the glue factory. And then father came home before he finished and got to talking to him and

saw that he wasn't—what he seemed to be; so he asked him to stay for supper."

"Well, my word!" Leila was frankly envious; for a new man in Hollisburg—a new young man, who was handsome and could dance, and who came from New York—was such a rarity that it was something of a social distinction to have seen him first, even if he did look like a tramp. The Hollises, Leila reflected rather resentfully, could tell who was somebody no matter what clothes he wore; as for her, he might have stayed a tramp forever for all she would have known. Ruth had put one over.

"Then you know all about him," Leila continued.

Ruth shook her head.

"He talked to father nearly all the time—about the crops, and the tariff. He seemed to know a good deal about them and he——"

As the piano and drums started up inside Herb laid a possessive hand on her arm.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "We want to dance this one."

Halfway around the floor he grunted:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I have told you?" she demanded coolly. "He was father's guest, not mine. Did you go around to see him with Norman Kane?"

"I did not! And I won't either. I don't care if he is a Phi Chi—he came into town as a tramp and he still looks like a tramp to me. And George saw him sweeping out Sellers' office this morning."

"That's an awful crime, isn't it? Because if he'd been up on the hill he could have seen me sweeping

out—— Oh, yes, I know that's one of the things we don't talk about; but you know I do it. You've seen me."

"That's different."

Ruth wasn't so deeply flattered by this remark as she should have been.

"Maybe it is," she agreed, "because I'm not writing a book about it. So you're not going to greet the new frat brother?"

"He's no frat brother of mine," said Herb firmly. "He may belong, all right, but lots of bums get into any fraternity. He was a tramp when we passed him in the road yesterday morning, and even if Clay Sellers took him in he's still a tramp. What's he doing, anyway, working for Sellers? Something mighty queer about this."

Any sympathy Ruth might have felt for Nick Rexford had been dulled by the fact that he had seen the Hollises in their poverty-stricken shame. Unintentionally he had touched them on their sorest spot; and even though it wasn't his fault she found it hard to forgive him. But it was equally hard to forgive Herb for his bitterness—a mean quality; the sort of quality she wouldn't like to have around the house, to face at the breakfast table for the rest of her life.

And though nothing had been said she knew that things had gone so far with her and Herb Pence that it was very likely that she was going to have him around the house.

"Why didn't you knock him down yesterday?" she asked suddenly.

"Didn't think he was worth it."

"But you told him to keep out of Hollisburg, and here he is."

"Do you want me to go and beat up on him?"

Well, of course Ruth didn't. She didn't even wish that Herb had beaten up on him yesterday. She didn't know what she wanted; so she was silent, with cold anger, as they strolled out on the veranda after the dance ended.

"Let's walk," said Herb irritably, lighting a cigarette. They went down into the path along the river, which here broadened into a long still pool. A full moon hung over the southern hills. It was hard to stay angry in this night which was a symphony of pale silver, deep green and black. Ruth's hand slipped automatically into Herb's arm as they fell into step and Herb couldn't know that she was thinking about the moon, and Debussy, and life at large. He supposed, naturally, that she was thinking of him.

So, as they stepped into the shadow, he swung about suddenly and caught her in his arms. She stood passive as he kissed her—so coldly passive that it discouraged him more than a blow. He released her with a growl:

"What the dickens is the matter with you tonight?"

"More than any other night?" Ruth asked.

"You know what I mean. You've let me kiss you before."

"Well, I let you kiss me just now, didn't I? I had no choice. You're a little unexpected, Herb. Maybe some ladies like it, but I don't."

"I thought——" he began, then subsided into a muttered: "Oh, hell."

After a moment of silence she asked wistfully:

"Herb, why can't you be kind to people?"

"Who? This Rexford? Now see here, what do you care about him?"

"Nothing. But I've cared something about you——"

It was a golden opportunity for a young man who knew how to take it. But Herb answered stubbornly:

"Well, if you care about me you know what I'm like and you can take me or leave me. This is a clean, live, hustling town; and do you know how dad made it that way? He ran out all the riffraff that had been hanging around before he came. He put Frank Flint in office and cleaned the place up. He kept out the tramps and got people to work. And when I see a tramp I'm going to tell him where he gets off; and I won't run around and beg his pardon afterward just because somebody finds out he wears a Phi Chi pin. Do you suppose Norman Kane would have run around to shake hands with this fellow if he hadn't been a Phi Chi? I should say not. Nor Cal Truman either. And I say a bum's a bum no matter what kind of a pin he wears; and we know what to do with bums in Hollisburg."

Ruth laughed.

"Well, are you going to do it? You had a chance in the road yesterday. You'll have a chance next time you meet him on the street. Are you going to run him out of town?"

"Never mind what I'll do to him," said Herb ob-

scurely. "Wait and see. What I want to know is why you stand up for him."

"It is strange, isn't it," Ruth agreed, "that anybody in Hollisburg should dare to stand up for a man you're down on."

"Well, I won't have you doing it, do you hear? Oh, I know you've never said you were going to marry me, but you've just the same as said it. And if you think I'm going to have my wife sticking up for all the ragtag and bobtail that comes looking for a handout, you're wrong. In my position I can't afford it. You know what I think and you——"

"And I can take you or leave you," said Ruth. "All right. I leave you. You and your position, too."

And she swung about and walked quickly back to the clubhouse.

He was at her heels in a moment, puffing.

"Ruth! What the devil—where are you going?"

"Home," she threw back over her shoulder as they mounted the steps to the porch. It was empty; everybody else was dancing. Ruth walked on, without looking behind her, to the women's cloakroom; and at the door he reached out and caught her elbow.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"What I said." She was calm, almost nonchalant; rather sullen, perhaps, but not much more so than usual. "I'm going home—alone."

"You said you'd leave me. Do you mean you——"

Ruth drew a light blue cape—like all her clothes, the made-over relic of something else—over her shoulders.

"I mean it," she said and started for the door.

"Wait till I get out the car," Herb insisted. "You can't walk back to town."

"It's only four miles. I won't lose my way, with a full moon."

He hesitated and while he hesitated she made off down the driveway. Herb stood uncertainly in the door. The shock had stunned him; though she'd never expressly promised to marry him he had taken it for granted. In Hollisburg, a Pence could take everything for granted.

The music stopped; he couldn't let himself be caught here by people who would want explanations. Much better to pretend they had driven away together; then there would be nothing to explain when this had all been settled. For, because it was the easiest and most comfortable thing to believe, Herb believed that when Ruth got over her mood it would be settled, and readily.

So he started up the car parked under the trees outside the clubhouse and drove off down the road. In a moment he caught sight of her, striding along with a steady grace in the moonlight. He drove up behind her, slowed down, ran past, and stopped.

"Get in," he commanded. Ruth strode on; the car followed slowly.

"Look here," Herb called. "Do you want to make us look like a couple of idiots, with the car trailing you into town?"

"You don't have to trail me."

"Well, I will."

"All right," said Ruth. "We probably are a couple of idiots and we might as well look like it."

He crept along by fits and starts, now gliding past her before he could check the car, now following a hundred feet behind; but she said no more. And when at last they reached the first houses he swore viciously, put on speed and shot past her. Herb couldn't stand being laughed at.

It was lucky for Ruth, however, that he had trailed her to the edge of town. So long as he was close behind her consciousness had no room for anything but her anger. When he drove on and left her alone she had time to think. For a year past she had had no occasion to worry about the future, because it was understood that she was going to marry Herb—Herb, and the bank, and the real-estate development corporation, and the flood-insurance company.

She had really liked him last summer, when he came back home from college—a college where there had been richer and more brilliant men to keep him in a wholesome obscurity. She had liked him well enough to give at least a tacit consent to the understanding that some day they would progress through formal engagement to marriage.

But a year back home had had its effect on Herb Pence—a year of Hollisburg where his father was the autocrat and he was the heir apparent. For months she had seen him steadily becoming more opinionated, more stubborn, more disagreeable. At first she had tried, with such subtlety as she could command, to keep him human; but months ago she had given up trying. That was the worst of it—she no longer cared enough to try. She had been taking him as he was until to-night, when she realized that she must forever take him as he was, or leave him.

And then the thing she hadn't been able to think of while he was close behind her came up and stared her in the face as she strode on, less vigorously now, through the streets of the town. What was to become of the Hollises, buried beneath their impossible burden of mortgages, if she didn't marry Herb Pence?

All at once Ruth felt very tired, terribly discouraged, almost frightened. Her father would still be awake, if she went home now; and he would want to know why she had left the dance. She must have time to think; she must stay out till her father was asleep. And so, because the movie theater had just finished the last program of the night and there was no other place to go, she stopped at Dan Cullen's lunch counter.

XI.

The Lady Returns to Normalcy.

NICK REXFORD sat that evening in the chair on the sidewalk, tilted back against the brick wall and shadowed by the trees, where Clay Sellers had been sitting the night before. He was alone, for Sellers had gone back to the courthouse after supper to delve into the obscure history of a real-estate title; and as he smoked one cigarette after another, listening languidly to the clatter of the busy garage across the street, he was surprised to find that he was also lonesome.

There was no excuse for loneliness to-night. Norman Kane had come to see him in the afternoon, bringing two or three other youths with him, and an invitation to the Country Club dance had virtually ratified Rexford's adoption into the younger set of Hollisburg.

He hadn't accepted the invitation to the dance, largely because he had supposed that Sellers would stay at home and might want to talk; nor had he accepted other invitations to come down to the Chamber of Commerce and shoot a game of pool. But he knew that he would begin accepting invitations before long; he had, in effect, found a new home town. This last six weeks of his year, which only yesterday had seemed so hazardous, was going to be passed

in comfort, with an easy job and pleasant company. For all of which he had to thank Clay Sellers, who had saved him from being locked up as a tramp in order to have somebody to talk to.

But to-night Sellers wasn't here to talk to him and a loneliness that Rexford had fought and conquered when he worked on solitary jobs or in uncongenial company fell on him hard in a town which was ready to take him in. To-morrow, if he liked, he could meet everybody; but he wanted company to-night. To sit here alone meant only that he would wonder what to do with his money when he got it; wonder why Sellers had been so kind to him; wonder if Herb Pence would follow the other brothers in welcoming him to Hollisburg; wonder why Blades' garage should be so incessantly and noisily busy; wonder, in fact, about a dozen things, none of which he could settle.

He got up jerkily and strode away toward Main Street. A walk would do him good; a cup of coffee would wake him up. So he walked into Dan Cullen's and found the white-aproned proprietor dozing behind the counter, while a single customer perched on one of the high stools—a girl with a light blue cape thrown over her white frock—was staring moodily at a cup of untasted coffee.

The bang of the screen door behind him roused her and she stared at him blankly for a moment, convinced that her thoughts had come to life. Automatically she nodded, in silence; and Rexford returned her greeting with a shy good humor that she couldn't help finding attractive, even though at this moment she hated Rexford as much as she hated

Herb Pence. But she turned resolutely back to consideration of her coffee and Cullen woke up to take Rexford's order.

"Coffee," said Rexford. "Good and black—no sugar."

Cullen drew a cup from the shiny boiler on the counter.

"Ain't seen the police to-night," he observed. "I guess Clay scared them off for good."

"It seems so," Rexford agreed. "I passed Flint on the street to-day and he wouldn't even speak to me. Darned unsociable, I thought, considering that last night he was inviting me to spend the next couple of years in his care. While they were giving Mr. Crisler the keys of the city they tried to give me a ticket for the hoosegow "

"Flint's too fresh," said Cullen. "But he ain't a bad fellow to get along with. Trouble last night was, he knew Pence expected him to keep the town clear of tramps; but I guess Pence will let you stay now, eh?"

Chuckling, he moved back to the other end of the counter, sat down, and in a moment was dozing again.

Ruth flattered herself that she was observing Rexford quite unobtrusively. At this moment she hated him because he had been the occasion of her quarrel with Herb. The calmer half of her surmised that in the long run she might be grateful to him, for eventually she must have quarreled with Herb, and better to do it now before it was too late. Just now, however, the quarrel had roused so many disturbing questions that she couldn't help feeling a violent re-

sentment at the man who had innocently started it.

From beneath her long black lashes her glance stole back to Rexford again and again. She had pitied him yesterday because he looked so meek and obscure and bedraggled. But he looked none of those things to-night. Dressed in Clay Sellers' second-best blue serge, with the recovered Phi Chi pin sparkling on his soft shirt, he looked handsomer, smarter, than any of the men in Hollisburg. He had what Ruth supposed must be the New York manner.

Herb, apparently, had set the police on him, but Sellers had got him out of trouble. Another point against Herb; but it didn't make Ruth feel more kindly toward Rexford. This tramp had come to town to pry into the laboriously hidden poverties of the Hollises, to start a quarrel which had broken up her affair with Herb Pence; and after doing an infinite amount of damage both to her pride and to her plans for the future he was sitting here ten feet away from her looking as cheerful as if he had never done harm to anybody in his life.

Unexpectedly she spoke up.

"Yesterday morning," she said in a voice too low to wake the dozing Cullen, "you said that you couldn't see why anybody should stop in Hollisburg. But you changed your mind."

"I didn't know Hollisburg yesterday morning," he apologized. "Since then I've discovered a number of attractions."

"Such as?" Ruth asked politely, confident that he would say something personal and complimentary, whereupon she could put him in his place.

"A steady job," he told her, "light employment

and a comfortable home. That means a good deal to us floating laborers."

"Oh, don't tell me that old story. It was good enough last night, but everybody's heard about your book."

"My book?" Ruth wondered that he could face her so impudently; then looked at him again and decided that he must be in earnest. And there Ruth Hollis made her first concession to Nick Rexford.

"Your book on sociology. Sellers said you——"

Rexford grinned.

"So that's how Sellers explained me away, is it? I thought it was queer that everybody should overlook my past. I suppose they want to get kindly mention. Well, Miss Hollis, don't tell anybody; but I'm not writing a book. Never did and never will."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Working for Clay Sellers—just as I worked for you yesterday or would have worked for anybody else who hired me."

"But why?"

"Simplest of all reasons. I have to eat."

"Well!" said Ruth, smiling in spite of herself.

Rexford sighed.

"I might have known," he confessed, "that that would take all the excitement out of it. If you're working for fun you can do almost anything without losing caste; but if you have to do it most kinds of labor seem to be disgraceful. You have to pick and choose and there isn't much choice in Hollisburg."

"So I find," said Ruth in a whisper. Then, hastily, to cover her feeling that she had given herself away, she asked:

"And what do you do when you can pick and choose?"

"Me?" Rexford's eyes were on the cigarette he was rolling; when he looked up it was with a rueful grin. "Why, Miss Hollis, I don't seem to have a profession just yet. I'm a pretty fair farm hand; but that's about all."

"Then," said Ruth, "the other stories about you are made up, too?"

"What other stories?"

"That you came from New York, and that you're —oh, quite a person."

"I did come from New York once," Rexford admitted, "and I used to think I was quite a person. Once upon a time I had expectations; but they dropped out from under me, and here I am."

"But you didn't learn farming in New York."

"Oh, no. I've knocked around a good deal. This job Sellers has given me looks like a promotion compared with some I've had. I suppose, to live up to the traditions, I ought to study law and get to be a justice of the supreme court. Then people would be proud they knew me when I was sweeping out. Sweeping out is romantic, if it leads to the supreme court; or if you're doing it to get dope for a book on sociology; or if you're doing it for fun. But there's no glory in sweeping out because you have to."

"I know it!" said Ruth fiercely; and then, angered with her inability to control the feelings she had been hiding all her life, she laid her dime on the counter and slipped down off the stool. Through the screen door she looked out at Main Street. By

the opposite curb stood Herb's bright blue car; Herb himself was probably lingering in the drug store, waiting for her. If she went home alone he would follow her; and in the town, where they could be seen and overheard, she couldn't suppress him as she had done on the road.

So she chose the lesser evil and turned back to Rexford.

"Will you walk home with me?" she asked. There was no sentimental intimacy in her tone; she sounded like a school teacher inviting a little boy to stay in and be whipped. Nevertheless, he assented.

They sauntered down the shaded side street, as casual as brother and sister; but Ruth was thankful for the shadows. Apparently Herb hadn't seen them, at least he hadn't followed. She was silent until they had started up the hill and reached the zone of broad lawns and houses set back out of earshot. Then she said in a dull, helpless tone that caught his sympathy at once:

"I wish I'd never heard of you, or seen you. I wish you hadn't come to cut the grass yesterday; I wish you'd left town last night. You've seen things about our house that—that people aren't supposed to see. . . . Oh, they see them, I suppose, but it's an old story here and people don't notice them or think about them. *We* don't think about them—till a stranger comes.

"But you've seen more than that. You've seen how I feel about it. You've heard things I never said before, to anybody. To-night I happened to be upset by—by something that happened, so I forgot myself and said them; and now you know——"

"You haven't said anything," he interrupted quietly.

"Don't be silly. I haven't said ten words, but that was too much. Because you've seen. You know. You know what those ten words meant."

He did know, and respected her enough to quit pretending that he didn't.

"I'm a good forgetter, Miss Hollis. If you said anything to-night I've forgotten it already. And it will stay forgotten."

She looked at him and knew he meant it; but that couldn't dull her shame at having let her guarded emotions slip for the first time in her life.

"Why of all places in the world," she demanded bitterly, "did you pick Hollisburg to settle down in?"

"If it's any comfort to you, I'm here for six weeks only. If it will really help any, I'll move on to-night."

"Don't be silly. The damage has been done now. . . . And where are you going when you leave here?"

Irrepressible, the curiosity of high-spirited, tight-reined twenty-one had revived; not even shame could kill it. And that was Ruth Hollis's second concession to Nick Rexford.

"Back to New York," he told her. "Perhaps to stay, perhaps not. Meanwhile, one reason I like Hollisburg is that it's a long way from New York. There's nobody here who knew me when."

"And there would be nobody in New York," Ruth mused, "who knew me in Hollisburg. . . . What could I do in New York? I mean work—work people pay for. What do girls like me do in New York,

who have to make a living and don't know anything but housework?"

His face darkened. The shyness, the easy good humor of his manner at the lunch counter—somehow it had reminded her of Charlie Chaplin—was gone. Even in the shadow, she could see the lines in his face. He had been through the mill.

"A year ago," he said, "I'd have told you there were a thousand things you could do in New York. But that was before I'd had to work myself. I've discovered there aren't a lot of things anybody can do who hasn't been trained. I don't want to be a gloom, but you want the truth.

"When I knew about work from hearsay it looked easy—when everybody I knew had a job he got through his family or his friends, and had so much money he didn't need a job anyway. But it isn't so easy as it looks. . . . I don't know what girls do in New York anyway because the girls I knew were mostly just playing around till they found somebody they wanted to marry. Some of them did social work and charity work and things like that, and the pretty ones got to be actresses, on the stage or in the movies, just because they were who they were; but it was just play for all of them. No matter how hard you take work, it's only playing around unless you have to live on what you make. And all these girls had money enough to keep on playing. Golf or child psychology or acting for the movies—it was only play. They didn't need the money."

"But you can't keep on playing in a small town," Ruth objected, "even if you do have the money.

You play around till all the men of your own age have married or gone to the city and then you have a choice between old widowers with flocks of children and kids you used to hold on your lap a few years ago. I don't want that, anyway. I want to work for a living—make money—go somewhere—do something. Where could I go? What could I do?"

What interested Rexford, of course, was why she had to go anywhere and what she would do with the Colonel if she went. Obviously she felt that she couldn't stay in Hollisburg. That meant that the mortgages were going to be foreclosed. In other words, she wasn't going to marry Herb Pence. And while it was none of Rexford's business he gave three silent cheers. It would have been a sin and shame to sacrifice her to that fat-faced fussy incapable.

"What do you want to do," he asked, "if you had a choice?"

"I want to do something honest," she said tensely. "I don't care what, but something real—something I'm not ashamed of—something I won't have to pull down the shades to hide. I'd like something that's my own, of course—my own particular job that nobody else could do. But there doesn't seem to be anything like that."

They were crossing the street in front of her home now; by the light of the arc lamp he saw that she was trembling. Bitter frankness was necessary, no doubt, but it could be overdone.

"Of course," he assured her, "there are lots of girls who do come to New York without any special

training, and get good jobs, and hold them. Plenty of girls. But I don't happen to know how it's done——"

She smiled cheerlessly.

"When St. Elmo Pence came to Hollisburg," she told him, "he started clerking in the feed store at six dollars a week. You see where he is now. But I don't happen to know how it's done."

Slowly they mounted the long flight of steps between the overhanging sycamores.

"Anyway," said Rexford cheerfully, "you and I both have the right idea. I thought I was going to be a broker once, but I've got over that. I'm still looking for my own particular job, and the one thing I've learned in this last year is to go on looking till I find it. I think you're absolutely right; and I'll tell you what I'll do, though it may not help. I'll write to a girl I used to know in New York, who got tired of keeping house for her husband and started a hat shop. I don't know that she makes any money except what she saves on her own hats, but she does know lots of women who have got their own jobs and live on what they make. Maybe she can tell us something."

"Would you really do that?" she asked in an eager undertone. "It would help—more than I can tell you."

He didn't tell her that this was the first fracture of a resolution he had kept since last September—to cut himself off absolutely from all his old friends. He had intended to keep that resolution forever. The past year had taught him that he could get along without his old friends surprisingly well, and that

with only twenty-five thousand dollars behind him he could never keep up with them. But he hadn't foreseen anything like this. He had come by chance upon the shame of Ruth Hollis; this was the least he could do in reparation.

They came up in front of the dark and silent house and paused for a moment to look back. The trees of the hillside hid the town. A soft haze hung over the valley, a moonlit silver screen across its deep green shadows.

"And you've had this to look at all your life," said Rexford. "No wonder people stay in Hollisburg."

Ruth had grown up in Hollisburg in the era of Pence. That remark turned her into the local patriot, under obligation to explain the merits of the local scene to the stranger.

"You ought to see the view from the old Miller place, back up on the hill. That's the finest outlook in the county. I believe Mr. Pence is trying to sell it to the sanitarium people."

Rexford's eyes searched her fine troubled face, the slim figure wrapped in the long blue cape.

"I wish you'd take me to see this view some time," he said.

Ruth looked back at him and smiled. Even if he was an office boy and she an overworked housekeeper, even if they both had more troubles in prospect than beset them now—still she was twenty-one and he was twenty-three, and it was an August moon.

"Maybe I will," she conceded. "I suppose I ought to hate you. I've told you things to-night that I never told anybody else and never will. But

I wouldn't have said them if I hadn't been nervous and off my balance and it isn't fair to hate you just because you happened to be within earshot. No use hating people anyway, especially people who try to help. Thank you. You've done a lot."

"I've done nothing," he told her, "and certainly I've heard nothing. There's a secret bond between us—we both belong to the Brotherhood of the Broom. I never tell anybody what I hear in lodge meeting. And you won't tell anybody I'm not a sociologist, will you? It's the first time I've ever been accused of being able to do anything that called for brains."

"Pooh!" said Ruth. "Probably you have lots of brains. Anyway——"

"Anyway," he suggested, "may I come and see you some time?"

"Please do," said Ruth hospitably. "I know father likes to hear you talk about the tariff."

XII.

Various Fruits of Insomnia.

REXFORD found Sellers with his feet on the desk and a corncob pipe between his teeth, reading.

"You're comin' along fast," he observed. "If I'd come home and found you missin' last night I'd have supposed you must have been carried off to jail; but now I reckon you must have been out at some scene of revelry."

"Nothing like that," Rexford assured him, wondering if Sellers, who saw so many things, perceived his agitation. He was filled with an excitement that couldn't be accounted for merely by his brisk walk down the hill. No, he had suddenly discovered a new importance in work. Work, for him, had been only a mildly amusing and no longer exhausting occupation by which he earned his living and qualified himself for the inheritance of twenty-five thousand dollars. But to Ruth Hollis work was more important. Rexford had the feeling, which he made no effort to explain, that anything connected with her welfare was important.

"I—I've just been out for a walk," he said nervously. "Hope I haven't missed any of my duties."

Sellers sighed.

"Never saw such a glutton for work. Go around and talk that way to Elmo Pence and he's liable to make you vice president of the bank. You couldn't be any worse at the job than Herb."

Rexford, intent on his own reflections, heard and answered the words without paying any attention to their sense.

"That isn't manual labor, and I've got to—— Which brings me," he interrupted himself with sudden animation, "which brings me to the topic of the evening, Mr. Sellers."

"That ain't my name except in court. Clay to my friends."

"The topic of the evening," said Rexford stubbornly. "Which is that you don't give me enough work to do. It's a joke to say that I earn my living by what little I do around this place. It isn't an hour's work a day."

Sellers grunted.

"I reckon it ain't very exciting for one that's been used to New York——"

"Why, confound you," Rexford exploded, "don't you think I realize what you've done for me? You kept me out of jail; you fed me and clothed me and gave me a steady job so that I don't have to ride the blind baggage and ask for work at kitchen doors. If we lived in the merry old feudal days I suppose I'd put my hands inside of your hands and swear homage and promise to go out and make bloody war on your enemies. But——"

"But I've got no enemies, except maybe the Pences and Blades, and I don't see we'd get anywhere by makin' war on 'em. We got Pence's goat by keepin'

you out of jail, but I'm afraid that's as far as we go. No, Rexford, what I need is a listener, not a warlike vassal. I come home from the courthouse all full of thoughts about the freedom of the will——"

"I'll listen to that in a minute," said Rexford with rather surprising earnestness. "And I want you to know that while I'm around this town I'm on call for discussions or arguments any evening. That isn't gratitude. I like to hear you talk. But don't you see that with this job you've given me I can't pretend I'm living up to the provisions of the will? And I'm going to need that twenty-five thousand."

"What for?" Sellers inquired. "Last night you didn't seem to have anything special on your mind." It seemed unnecessary to add that, on his way home from the courthouse, he had happened to see Ruth and Rexford passing under a street light on their way toward the hill.

"Oh, I haven't anything special in mind," said Rexford nervously. "But anybody would be better off with twenty-five thousand than without twenty-five thousand, wouldn't he?"

"That seems reasonable," Sellers agreed. "But look here. There's no doubt whatever about the distinction, legal, logical and moral, between manual and intellectual labor. You said you'd had some thought of drivin' a taxi, for instance. Admitting that this calls for the use of considerable head-work, there's no doubt about it's bein' manual labor. Now I've been meanin' for years to buy a car——"

Rexford's jaw dropped.

"No reason why I shouldn't," Sellers persisted irritably. "I don't make much money but I spend a blame sight less. No reason why I should take the trolley out to the Country Club when everybody else goes in automobiles, especially these days when I feel like a swim every morning if I wasn't too blamed lazy to go down and wait for the interurban. But I never drove a car in my life. It would take me at least six weeks to learn and in the meantime I've got to have a chauffeur. If you'll take that on, on top of your other duties——"

"It seems too easy," said Rexford. "Yes, yes, I know that meets the requirements of the will. But it doesn't seem right, after——"

"After you've been knockin' around the country lookin' for the hardest work you can find," Sellers supplied. "Rexford, I believe you think it's wicked to take life easy."

"Sometimes it is," said Rexford savagely. "Colonel Hollis——"

"If Colonel Hollis wants a job as my chauffeur he can have it," said Sellers, repressing a grin.

"But you know and I know, Rexford," he went on, "that there ain't a reason on earth why you shouldn't take this job. Elmo Pence feeds and lodges his chauffeur and pays twenty-five a week besides. If I keep you at fourteen, as I propose to do, I'm makin' you a downtrodden wage slave and you ought to write a letter to *The Nation* about it."

"Your oppressive capitalistic offer is accepted," said Rexford, "on condition that you let me pick the car. I know a Ford and a Sagamore by heart. Anything in between is more or less strange ground

to me, but I know enough about engines in general——"

"I admit a Ford is my size and my general preference. But I heard just yesterday that Blades has got a second hand Sagamore for sale. Picked it up down in Louisville from some fellow that went broke."

"It uses a lot of gas," said Rexford, "but the Sagamore's a good car. I had one, once. Had to sell it when the grand smash came, to pay my debts."

Sellers looked at his watch.

"Only eleven o'clock. I reckon maybe Blades is still out at the Country Club, but Rufe will be there. We'll just call 'em up and tell 'em we'll be over in the morning to take a look at that Sagamore by daylight. It's both sinful and illegal to do business on Sunday, but I reckon there's no harm in lookin' over a car to see if you want to buy it on Monday."

He took down the telephone and presently got an answer from the garage.

"Blades there?" he asked.

"Blades won't be back till late," said Rufe's surly voice.

"When I was young," said Sellers, "eleven o'clock was good and late in Hollisburg. But that was before country clubs were invented. Say, Rufe! This is Clay Sellers talking. You still got that Sagamore car?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want to come over and take a look at it in the morning. Maybe I'll buy it if the price is right."

"I said we still got it," said Rufe. "Meaning we

got it on the premises. But Blades sold it to a dealer in Cincinnati and we're goin' to ship it Monday morning. Hell, you didn't think there was any market for Sagamores in Hollisburg, did you? Might as well try to sell the Czar's crown."

"Thus crashes my dream of grandeur," said Sellers, hanging up the receiver. "He's sold it in Cincinnati. Blades does a lot of business there. Well, Rexford, it's got to be one extreme or another. If I can't get a Sagamore I want a Ford. And now, the night bein' far advanced——"

"I'll listen to your thoughts on the freedom of the will," said Rexford, rolling a cigarette.

"Oh, they've plain slipped my mind," Sellers apologized. "Because, you see, the only freedom you've got is what was left you by your grandfather's will. And that's more than most of us have got. Bound to the wheel of destiny. No, I think we better go to bed; but first let's stroll over to the blue-lick well and get our nightly appetizer."

"I must be getting used to Hollisburg," said Rexford as he put on his hat. "That proposal doesn't rouse the horror I would have felt this morning."

As they stumbled toward the well in the darkness of the shaded lot they saw before them a blot of white, moving back and forth. It materialized, on closer view, into a straw hat—the hat of a man who was sitting on the platform around the well and fanning himself to blow the sulphur smell away. At their approach he rose, peering intently.

"Why, good evening, Mr. Crisler," said Sellers cheerfully. "I take it you like our mineral spring."

"Thought I'd sample it," Crisler admitted. "Our

chemists, of course, report on all the wells we consider; they've got bottles of water from all up and down the valley. But I'm troubled by insomnia; when it gets me I simply have to go out and walk. I couldn't sleep to-night, and happening to smell this local product of yours I thought I'd step over and see if it'd really do me as much good as everybody promised.

"You're Mr. Sellers, aren't you? I met your whole town yesterday and I haven't quite got names and faces sorted out yet. I don't believe I recall——"

"My friend Mr. Rexford," Sellers supplied. "He had his first drink of this stuff last night and comes back of his own free will for a second. Hollisburg's a very seductive town, Mr. Crisler."

Rexford leaned over and cautiously put his mouth under the faucet. As he bent away from them Crisler drew Sellers aside and whispered:

"Can you shake your friend? I want to talk to you alone—and out of doors."

Sellers thoughtfully filled his pipe.

"Rexford," he said, "do you realize that this is about the first chance Mr. Crisler has had to open his mouth since he came to Hollisburg? People have been talkin' at him ever since yesterday noon, but since Pence made us a town of sales talkers the art of listening has pretty well died out. Now I, bein' a bad citizen, am curious enough to pamper Mr. Crisler's insomnia. I'd like to set down with him here on this platform, under the silent moon, and find out what he really thinks about us and our water. But I don't want to keep you up."

"I was going back to write a letter, anyway. Have to get it out to-night."

And Rexford faded into the blackness as Sellers sat down on the boards around the spring.

"We're as out of doors now as you can get in the city limits," he said. "I infer from your demeanor that you've got something highly secret on your mind. You're welcome to what I can tell you; but first maybe I better supply a gap in your knowledge. I don't belong to the gang in this town; I don't like them and they don't like me. I disagree with their philosophy of life so blamed much that—I assure you there's nothing personal in this, Mr. Crisler—that I don't care a hoot whether you locate your sanitarium here or in Adamsville."

Crisler laughed silently.

"I've heard all about you, Mr. Sellers. That's why I've been waiting out here for the last hour and a half. They told me you came out to the well every night, and what I've got to say to you I don't want to say in your front office, where anybody can see us talking together. I'm likely to need a lawyer here and from what I've heard I'll need you; for I expect to have some business that may not be so easy to handle through your—er—courthouse crowd."

"If your sanitarium company needs legal advice this early——"

Crisler held up an interrupting hand, peered cautiously this way and that in the darkness.

"Mr. Sellers—I'm talking in confidence, now, as a client to a lawyer—I don't know any more about a sanitarium than you do."

"Huh?" said Clay Sellers. "Then you have certainly provoked a lot of unnecessary talk and futile study around Hollisburg. Everybody in town but me has been waitin' in line at the public library for the encyclopedia, letter S. And all in vain, eh? Then just what are you doin' in Hollisburg?"

"I'm an investigator," said Crisler. "Oh, well—call me a detective if you like. The sanitarium's only a false front. I'm down here in the interest of some automobile insurance companies. As you undoubtedly know there's been a regular plague of car stealing all up and down the valley—Adamsville, Vernon, Mt. Tabor—every town along Willow River, with the curious and suggestive exception of Hollisburg."

Sellers clasped his hands about his knees and grinned up at the trees that veiled the moon.

"Go on," he said.

XIII.

Vaulting Ambitions of Mr. Blades.

REXFORD found the composition of his letter to Marian Selden a good deal harder than he had expected. It meant the reëstablishment of contact with a world that he had resolutely tried to forget. Now he had to think back and remember it with something of the homeward yearnings of the exile; for he knew he had told the truth when he had said that he was forever disqualified as an old New Yorker. The old brownstone on Murray Hill—St. George's Church—the Union Club and the St. Nicholas Society—somehow he had been spoiled for them when he shocked wheat under the Kansas sun or chipped at frozen snow on the streets of Chicago.

But, if he could no longer be an old New Yorker, he could perhaps be a new New Yorker. Marian Selden had done that. She sold hats to the most atrocious and discreditable persons, to a clientele composed largely of bootleggers' wives and brokers' mistresses, and got a good deal of fun out of it. There was much to see in New York that had hitherto escaped the eyes of the Rexfords. Sometimes, during his years at Columbia, he had stared in amazement at the towering apartment houses on upper Broadway near the campus. What sort of people

lived there? What did they do? What amused them, what gave them pain? They weren't the sort of people he had known in New York, nor the sort he had met in his year of wandering. Yet he might find them amusing, if he went back and looked them over.

In fact there was a good deal of New York about which he knew nothing and in which he would probably be amused. With a capital of twenty-five thousand he couldn't keep up with his old friends; he knew well enough that he lacked the financial sense, the quick insight, that could turn thousands into millions. He had learned to save, he surmised that he might learn to invest shrewdly in safe and mildly profitable securities. But he was as sure as he had ever been of anything that he could never be rich now.

No matter. He wouldn't need to be rich. For in the past year he had discovered a curious pleasure in the details of the great fundamental industry, in the daily work of the farmer. Farming was a risky business, risky and unprofitable. But with a nest egg of twenty-five thousand to start on——

For that matter, he could probably do a good deal in New York with twenty-five thousand—not in the New York he had known, but in the new New York, the city Ruth Hollis would know if she tried to earn her living there. And because it was evidently his advent in Hollisburg that had set her to thinking of hunting work in New York, he felt a certain responsibility for Ruth Hollis.

Their lots, after all, were very much alike. Colonel Hollis was just about what Stuyvesant de Peyster

Rexford would have been if the ancestral Rexford real estate had been located in Hollis County instead of the neighborhood which was destined to become Park Avenue and 50th Street. The laws that governed the decline and fall of an old aristocracy seemed to be about the same in all countries, in all ages, in all towns, large and small. Slips of the old stock, if they had vitality, could transplant themselves and learn to live in a new environment. Nick Rexford had been transplanted by force, but Ruth Hollis was going to transplant herself on her own initiative. With no special training she would find it hard; but if Marian could help her, even with advice——

The main thing, then, was to make the problem clear to Marian. So he rewrote the letter half a dozen times before he found it satisfactory, and started out to mail it on the corner just as Sellers came in.

"You're keepin' late hours," said his employer severely. "Just for that I sentence you to sleep till ten o'clock to-morrow. Then after breakfast we'll go out and swim at the Country Club—only not in the costume you wore when I first saw you."

"I hope Mr. Crisler eased his mind about Hollisburg," Rexford suggested politely; for he had been too much preoccupied with his own affairs to speculate about the business which had kept Sellers at the blue-lick well for more than an hour.

"Oh, yes. He told me quite a lot. It would surprise you, friend Rexford, to find the stimulating comments that can be passed on your home town

by a stranger. He showed me a lot of things that had been right under my eyes, and I never saw them. Well, well, we live and learn. Ten o'clock to-morrow."

Rexford strode down to the corner, whistling. He had done what he could for Ruth Hollis and was only sorry it wasn't more. To have been able to do anything at all pleased him so much that he gave a kindly nod to George Blades, who was just turning into the garage after taking his sweetheart home from the dance, for a last look around before he went to his bed in the hotel. It was a nod such as any optimistic newcomer in a live town might give to a settled and prosperous citizen; and Rexford was much cheered when Blades returned it without perceptible hesitation. The greeting made him feel at home.

Blades stepped lightly into the garage office, whistling, with a cigarette between his fingers and a faint smudge of rice powder on the shoulder of his coat.

"Glad you feel so happy to-night," Rufe growled. "I ain't seen nothing to hang out flags about."

"Rufe, you're a gloom. Why shouldn't a man be cheerful who's been dancing with his girl all evening? Besides, Rufe"—his voice sank to a whisper—"I saw Raney while you were out at supper. Crisler was up on the Miller place this afternoon, but I guess he's got nothing on his mind but a sanitarium. Raney said he went to the edge of the hill and looked at the view and then came back and looked over the general lay of the ground and asked a few questions about drainage. But that was all.

And Raney had everything out of sight. He knows how to fix a haystack."

"I hope he fixed the road, too. A man that was lookin' for something might think he'd found it if he saw the treads of four or five kinds of tires goin' into one barnyard."

"Raney thought of that, you boob. He dragged his road with a plank before sunrise; and the only tracks Mr. Crisler saw were the tracks of Raney's own Ford. Anyway, Rufe, it's plain he wasn't after anything."

"I reckon not," Rufe conceded. "But this other bird—Rexford——"

"What about him? I met him on the street as I came in. What's he doing up at this time of night?"

"Think I'm a mind reader? I don't know what he's doin'. But I make my guess; and I guess he ain't doin' us any favors. I've kept an eye on him off and on all evening, through that knothole in the board fence. 'Bout half past nine he went down the street. Pretty soon I see him come strollin' back, toward the hill, with that Hollis girl."

"What? Rufe, you're crazy."

"Tell me I don't know that Hollis girl when I see her! They come right along the street here; I got a good look at 'em when they passed the light from the window. She was wearin' a blue cape over a white dress."

Blades sat down and began to laugh silently.

"You win," he said at last. "I saw her in that outfit at the Country Club. She came in with Herb and danced a couple of times with him and then they

disappeared. Everybody supposed they'd gone for a little drive in the moonlight; a few even bet they'd run off to Vernon to get married."

"Well, they didn't. Dick was over at Meservy's pool room to get some cigarettes a while ago, and he said Herb had been there most all evening."

"Well, well, well. This is certainly news. First time in his life anything ever went wrong for Herb in his home town. What will the old man think? Oh, Rufe, this is great."

"Yeh, this is fine, this is. You and your country club friends may be all excited about Herb's girl leavin' him flat, but what I want to know is what we're goin' to do with this Rexford. He went toward the hill with this girl and then come back a long time after. A while ago he and Sellers both went off down the street; he come back alone. Now he's out again——"

"Rufe, old dumb-bell, you can't scare me tonight."

"Oh, I can't, can't I? While ago, Sellers phoned over. Said he wanted to buy a car. Wanted to look at this Sagamore."

The cigarette dropped from Blades' lips.

"What did you tell him?"

"I done my best," said Rufe gloomily. "Told him we was goin' to ship it to Cincinnati Monday. I guess you can wire Ketzner and fix that end of it, but they can trace the thing to Cincinnati; and if they do that they can trace some more things back to us. George, I tell you we're in wrong. How many has Raney got?"

"Two Buicks and a Dodge."

"I remember. One from Vernon, one from Adamsville and one from down on Sugar Creek. We've got three centuries tied up in them cars; and if anything's wrong Raney can't afford to get caught drivin' 'em down here at night. Some of them farmers might be gettin' up early and ketch him some morning."

Blades lit another cigarette, with returning cheerfulness.

"Well?" he asked. "What's the answer?"

"Pull out, of course—unless we can get this Rexford quick. If we can get him we can afford to stick around till we sell out. If we don't we got to go."

"And leave our plant?"

"Plant!" Rufe spat contemptuously. "Pence owns the building, don't he? We can afford to leave our stuff. And if we fool around here much longer —I told you, George, it didn't pay to work these hick towns."

Blades again was laughing silently.

"Rufe, if I didn't get any more fun out of our game than you do I'd go into the ministry, where I could pass my grouch on to the congregation."

"All right. If you'd done eight years in San Quentin maybe you'd see things my way. I never had any friends to get me paroled. And if they ever catch up with you, you'll do four years besides——"

"I can take care of myself," said Blades.

"Yes, but we've done better together than either of us ever done alone. We're a good team, George. I'm all right for the rough work and you can do

the society stuff. We ought to go to Chicago. This town is too dead. But Chicago, or Detroit—some place where you could get goin' again among the rich dolls—you can always get them, George."

"Lord, yes. Remember that one at Santa Monica—the brewer's widow—Dolly? I came near marrying her, too. Marry and settle down."

"You'll settle down where there's neither marryin' nor givin' in marriage if you don't do something pretty quick," Rufe persisted. "Meaning San Quentin, unless Michigan City gets first call."

"And all you can think of is to do something to Rexford."

"That won't fix everything, but it will give us time to turn around."

"It won't fix anything. If Sellers is in on this he's the man to look out for. But he isn't popular in this town, Rufe. And if we got Rexford, I think maybe we could stop Sellers before anybody came to take Rexford's place."

"Who'd stop Sellers?"

"The man higher up."

"Meaning Pence? I thought you said we couldn't——"

"Rufe," said Blades thoughtfully, "do you realize that we cleared eight thousand dollars last year, aside from our trade in used cars?"

"Yeh. What of it?"

"That's a lot of money, in Hollisburg. Lawful money."

"Split two ways. Besides, I don't aim to live and die in Hollisburg."

"It might be fixed so you'd own the garage by yourself."

"You marryin' the Pence girl and takin' the rest of the town, I suppose. That would be a fine split, wouldn't it? Look here, George, if you figure on anything like that you want to remember I get my percentage."

Blades' eyes lingered on him coldly.

"There's no percentage to get, at present," he observed. "But give me a little time—and I might swing Pence. Provided, of course, they didn't have anything on us here. We've got only one car here now, besides this damned Sagamore."

"That old Overland Raney picked up in Vernon, the night the sawmill burned. That was a fine haul, that was."

Blades slapped his thigh.

"Rufe, we'll turn that Overland in to Flint tomorrow and tell him we suspect it's stolen."

"Are you crazy?"

"Not a bit. Tell him the bill of sale don't look right and we think the license plate's been changed."

"It certainly has," Rufe grinned. "Didn't I dump the old one off the bridge?"

"I can fix a story that will fool Flint," Blades asserted. "And that will cover us for a while. Then we can clean everything up."

"How about them three in Raney's haystacks? We can make three or four hundred on 'em if we turn 'em over now, through Ketzner. More if we wait and sell 'em off here."

"Too risky," Blades decided. "Shoot 'em off to

Ketzner as quick as we can handle them. Oh, not right away, of course. Got to make sure this Crisler is through with his nosing first. But as quick as we can. And then——

"And then," he went on thoughtfully, "we can sell out, pull out, or stay. I think old Pence would cover us if there was nothing on us here; and there isn't much chance they can trace any old stuff back to us unless something happens to Ketzner. I know Pence is careful; he'd hate to swallow it, maybe, if anything came up. But I can work him."

"I ain't so sure about that," Rufe persisted. "You can work the women but——"

"Leila can work Pence. Don't you worry about that, Rufe."

"What'd we do about Raney?"

"Raney could go back to working into Louisville, the way he was doing before we came. Raney's a piker. He'd never give us any trouble."

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life in this town," Rufe protested. "And we're such a damn good team, George——"

Blades smiled.

"Pence and I will be a better one."

XIV.

Fiery Ordeal, from Which Colonel Hollis Emerges Unscorched.

AFTER breakfast on Sunday morning Colonel O. P. M. Hollis came out on the front porch, in shirt sleeves and slippers, and settled down in his rocking-chair to read the Cincinnati *Enquirer*. The Colonel was at his best on Sunday mornings, when he rested from the labor of composing the history of Hollis County, just as any historian or man of affairs might relax after a hard week's work. Seated on the porch of his ancient mansion, overlooking his extensive grounds, he gathered round him something of the vanished magnificence of the great Hollises long dead; his Pittsburgh stogy sat between his teeth with the dignity of a Corona Corona. He smoked, and read, and reflected on the destiny of nations and the follies of mankind; and never heard the clatter in the kitchen, where Ruth was washing up the breakfast dishes.

Presently, her work done, she appeared in her plain blue frock, just as the Colonel had lifted his eyes from the newspaper to wonder what was the unfamiliar feature of the landscape which his subconsciousness had been trying to call to his attention for the past quarter of an hour. Somehow, things didn't seem the same; yet the house was still here, the trees, the yard—— Ah, that was it! The grass

had been cut. And this raised another question, which was not without its alarming aspect.

"Ruth," said the Colonel, "we never saw anything more of the young man who cut our grass. He said he'd call at the office the next day to get his money——"

His hand stole furtively to the trousers pocket where a dollar, borrowed from Jim Harby, had jingled pleasantly all yesterday morning and half the afternoon. But there was only a quarter now; the rest had gone for stogies.

"I guess he was too busy to drop in," said Ruth absently. "He got a job—working for Clay Sellers."

"My dear child! What conceivable sort of employment could Clay Sellers give him?"

"I believe he was hired as office boy and general handy man. There's quite a story about him."

"I judged so. Obviously he wasn't what he seemed. Good blood will tell, my dear. And what is the story?"

Ruth told it as Hollisburg knew it, till she came to the last point. After all, Rexford had asked her not to tell anybody he wasn't a sociologist, and the Colonel would be sure to hear that he was. Yet she wondered if it wasn't a streak of meanness in her that drove her to add:

"And Sellers said he was writing a book about sociology—tramping to get material. It may not be true, of course."

"I should think it very probable," the Colonel observed. "First-hand information—get down to facts before you draw your conclusions. It's a fine

thing, Ruth, that our young men are learning to be thorough. A fine thing, too, that young men of the better families are going in for serious intellectual effort. It wasn't so when I was young. Far from it. Business—politics—very degraded politics, too, in the eighties—those were the fields that attracted the ambitious young men, even of the best stock. A great misfortune, Ruth. It vulgarized the nation—destroyed the finer values. Those of us who tried to hold to the old traditions were too few.

"So he got right down to bedrock, did he? Worked with his hands. That's the right idea, Ruth. Tolstoy knew the peasants because he'd worked as a peasant. When critics of this young man's writings set out to tell him anything about Labor, he can answer them, 'Gentlemen, I know Labor. I have labored!'

"Yes, my dear. A fine thing. If he's going to be here in town we must see more of him. I thought he talked very sensibly, for a young fellow. We may be gratified, I think, that we were the first to entertain him in Hollisburg. We ought to have him up here again. Very fortunate, I think. Why, Ruth, the art of decent conversation has pretty nearly died out in Hollisburg except for Clay Sellers, who's so infernally peculiar that you can't do anything with him unless you suit his whimsies. But this young Rexford talks well."

As Ruth remembered it, Rexford listened well; but she was used to her father's habit of reshaping the rough facts of existence into something more decorative. And just now she wasn't much interested in Rexford. There was a more important mat-

ter on her mind. She had lain awake half the night thinking about it and wondering how to tell her father. But of one thing that sleepless pondering had convinced her—she couldn't and wouldn't marry Herb Pence. The quarrel had been only the climax of a long period of increasing strain in which she had accepted his attentions with growing sullenness, and Herb had steadily become more irritable and overbearing as she cooled. It was time to stop, and she wouldn't begin again. But—what next?

"Father," she said, "I'm not going to marry Herb."

The Colonel laid down his newspaper with considerable clatter; folded his spectacles and thrust them into his trousers pocket; straightened his tie, and looked at her with the solemnity of a patriarch presiding at the family council.

"I never heard officially," he observed, "that you were going to marry him. But that is the fashion of the time. I'd taken it for granted, like everybody else. So you're not?"

"I'm not."

"I don't want to pry into your affairs, my child; but young people are swift to decide and prone to change their minds. I suppose there has been a quarrel—a little tiff——"

"Oh, yes, we had a fight at the dance last night. Oh, not a real fight, no blows or anything. Just a quarrel."

"These things sometimes settle themselves," said the Colonel in the tone of a supreme-court justice citing precedents. "When the heated emotions of the moment have cooled——"

Ruth sighed, weary and disillusioned. But she wouldn't let her father—even her father—dragoon her back into this, now that she had realized she wanted to get out.

"Oh, I cooled off last night. I'm still cool this morning. And I hate him worse than ever. He just won't do!"

"This is your serious and considered decision?"

"Yes, father, I'm afraid it is."

The Colonel got up and ceremoniously embraced her.

"Then, daughter, this is the happiest day of my life. I wouldn't raise a hand to hamper your desires; you seemed to like him when he came home from college, and I stood aside; but if you've made up your mind I don't mind telling you that I've always considered him a most unmitigated bounder. Yes, my child. A bounder. The product of a vulgar family, flourishing in a vulgar age and—God forgive me that I should have to say it—in a vulgar town. Hrrrrmph! Forty years ago there was no room in Hollisburg for people like the Pences. Thank God we're not going to have them in the family."

Ruth couldn't choke back a sob of relief. Her father might be impractical, but he was right—right—all right. However——

"It won't be so easy, of course," she reminded him.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, father, there's no use pretending we aren't poor; and there's no use pretending the Pences aren't rich. And what we're going to do——"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. Something will take a favorable turn."

"But, father——" Ruth hadn't realized how hard it was going to be to talk business with him for the first time in her life; but it had to be done. "But, father, those mortgages on the house and the Hollis Building that you've given to Mr. Pence. You've heard him say, haven't you—I know I have—that he never forgets a friend or forgives an enemy. And I suppose we'll be his enemies from now on. If I'd married Herb——"

"Ruth, be silent. I will have you understand that petty questions of business, sordid details of finance, are to have nothing to do with my daughter's marriage. She bestows her hand where her choice may happen to fall. Great God, do you think I'm running a slave market?"

He was genuinely angry and Ruth was deliriously happy. For the first time in their lives she and her father really understood each other and respected each other. Still, that wouldn't pay off the mortgages.

"But—oh, father, you're a dear! But—and I want you to know I'm not going to marry Herb ever, for any reason—but how are we going to pay off those mortgages?"

The Colonel waved his arm.

"Give me time, child. Give me time."

"How much time have you?"

Reluctantly he came back to dates and figures.

"One of them falls due on the first of October," he recalled.

"That's only two months."

"A great deal may happen in two months. After all, we're not destitute, you know. There are the lots on Whitcomb Avenue."

"You couldn't get two hundred dollars for them. Why, last year you almost let them be sold for taxes."

He turned on her sharply.

"How did you know that?"

"Herb told me. He said his father had lent you——"

"Bounder! Whippersnapper!"

"I think I began to hate him then," Ruth admitted.

"Our real estate holdings aren't so valuable as they used to be," the Colonel admitted more thoughtfully. "If something happened to restore the popularity of the hill streets it would be another matter. But everybody wants to live in Pence's Addition. However, my dear, much may happen in two months. Hrrrmph! Before long I hope to push my history of the county to completion. I've taken my time over it——"

"Thirty years," Ruth thought despairingly.

"And I have no doubt it would prove remunerative in the hands of a publisher who knows his business. The older families of this part of the State would want it, of course; but it should command a wider public. An epic of changing times, painted on a broad canvas—— Well, well, daughter—we shall see. At any rate, I'm glad you're rid of that young whelp."

There was a pause.

"But we might as well make up our minds," Ruth persisted, "that we'll have to get out. Oh, very well,

if you'd rather—that we may have to get out. And I've been wondering how we'd live. Father, I want to go to work."

"Work?" The Colonel's hands shook as he stared at her wildly. "Work? Great God! I never thought to hear that word from my daughter's lips. Work!"

"Oh, not here, of course. For I thought if we had to leave the house we'd have to leave Hollisburg, too. I don't want to stay around here where everybody can see us. And we'd have to live on something, father. I know I haven't any training, but I could find something to do in Indianapolis or Chicago—or New York."

"No, daughter."

The old gentleman had recovered his poise. It had shaken him to the depths of his soul, that infamous word, "work," but he had command of himself once more. There was more of instruction than of indignation in his manner.

"No, daughter, that sort of thing isn't for you. We hear a great deal in these days about freedom for women, equality of economic opportunity, all that nonsense. Oh, I'm not bigoted. I grant you that for women of a different sort, women who by some mischance have been deprived of an opportunity to lead normal lives, it may be necessary. But not for you. They talk of their careers, these working women, of their work in life. But say what you will, my dear, the noblest career under heaven, the one for which Woman was ordained by almighty Providence, is the making of the home.

"We've lost a good deal, we Hollises, in the more

vulgar and material sense, but I flatter myself that we've always preserved the elegances, the finer graces. You couldn't preserve them in the hurly-burly of the business world. Why, Ruth, you don't understand what business is like. Contact with men —yes, and with women—of a lower, more vulgar type; the routine of an office, the sordid details of trade, concentration on the making of money—— No, no. A brave thought, child; but it won't do."

"But lots of girls just as good as I am are doing it."

He smiled at her.

"Where is the logic in that, my dear? Because some of the old stock in these unsettled times break away from the old traditions, shall we too forget? And granted that girls of your type do go into business, what happens to them?"

"They make a living," said Ruth.

"A living isn't life, child. No, no. They become very different, these business women; they—pardon the phrase, but it seems necessary—they become unsexed. Greedy grasping for money, rubbing shoulders with men whom she wouldn't speak to socially or invite to her home, coarsens a woman. It rubs off the bloom. No, no. A woman's career is within the four walls of her home. None of our women have ever worked."

He delivered that last word in a fine ironic tone that seemed to settle the argument. Ruth looked at her hands, calloused by the scrubbing brush and coarsened by dishwater, at broken finger nails that no amount of polishing could make as pretty as Leila Pence's. She remembered family traditions

of the migration of William Hollis and his family across the mountains, to build his log cabin where the courthouse stood now and fight off the Indians while he and his companions cleared the woods away and planted their corn.

If William Hollis's wife hadn't worked with her hands, all history was a lie. But, then, she had found her career within the four walls of the home.

The Colonel had turned back to his paper and his stogy. Ruth wanted desperately to continue the argument, to make it plain to him that something must be done. But it was useless, she knew. Her father was what he was. She couldn't change him. Like Herb, she must take him or leave him; and of course she couldn't leave him.

If he hadn't needed her, if he and she had both been independent, she could have ignored his arguments as thousands of other daughters were doing and had done. She could have gone out and got a job and left him to reconcile himself to it in the course of time. But he needed her. Somebody had to keep house for him so long as he had a house to keep. There were only two Hollises left, and if they went down they would go down together.

A few minutes later she was playing the piano. The Colonel recognized "The Love of the Three Kings" in a piano arrangement that Leila, who had heard the opera in Chicago, had brought home for Ruth. The child played well, he reflected proudly, but, thank God, not up to a professional standard. There was no danger that she would ever try to make a living out of music—make it her work.

Work. . . .

The terrible word rang and echoed in the Colonel's ears. It assaulted him again and again, in the crescendos of the music that Ruth was playing in the parlor. The Colonel knew the story of the opera. An old family that had run down, like the Hollises. A girl of this ancient line forced to marry the son of a self-made man, a young barbarian almost as crude as Herb Pence, though with a nobler nature. But the old barbarian, the father, was as ruthless as St. Elmo Pence. He had killed the girl.

Thank God Ruth had escaped that; their dying stock wasn't to be dishonored by crossing with thorns and thistles. But with St. Elmo Pence an enemy instead of a prospective kinsman, the finances of the Hollis family could no longer be regarded as solvent. Something would have to be done.

Work. . . .

No doubt the cares of the household sometimes weighed rather heavily on the child, but that was Woman's God-given duty, Woman's natural sphere. To go into an office, to sit at a desk, to go cringing to a window for a salary envelope every Saturday; to have to dispute with crude men over petty trifles, a nickel profit here and a dime loss there—no, his girl was too fine for that. She had a gallant spirit, but it was out of the question.

No, if anybody must work——

The Colonel gripped the arms of his rocking-chair like a passenger on a tossing ship. His face was drawn, his eyes glazed. The specter that had pursued him all his life, ever lurking behind him, darkening his serenest moments with its sinister shadow, had caught up with him at last. Work. . . .

He had once thought of studying law, when he came home from the university. He could still remember his father, sitting in this very armchair: "No, Perry, not the law. Petty chicanery, unfit for a man of rectitude. Politics? My dear boy, what attraction do you see in the politics of this year of our Lord 1881? Corruption. Vulgarity. Venal office holders and a debauched electorate. I'd be in Congress yet if I had stooped to muddy the wellsprings of public life—to buy up floaters in blocks of five, to indulge in the use of what is vulgarly known as soap. This country, Perry, has become unfit for a gentleman to live in. Since the contraction of our fortunes we Hollises may have to live in it, but at least we can refuse all responsibility for it, let it go its own way into the abyss."

So he hadn't studied law. He hadn't gone into politics. He had taken his father's advice, refused all responsibility for the conduct of affairs—and in consequence it was St. Elmo Pence and not Oliver Perry Morton Hollis who had won the right to bestow the keys of the city. The Hollises had founded it, governed it for three quarters of a century; but it was Pence's city now.

Yet he had, the Colonel reflected with somewhat more cheerfulness, he had striven to show the misled public an example of the gentleman and scholar, holding himself aloof from the crass and vulgar struggle with a refined blending of tolerance and disdain. And his position and character had received recognition even in a vulgarized age. He had cast an electoral vote for Harrison, another for McKinley. He had served on the Governor's staff.

He had addressed the State Historical Society. But then he had had a position, and an address—Colonel O. P. M. Hollis, Elm Street and Hollis Avenue, Hollisburg, Hollis County, Indiana. After October the house would pass to Pence; there would be no more credit at the grocery. The Hollises would have nothing. Ruth mustn't demean herself by earning her living; but if she didn't——

The music had stopped. The Colonel's clutch tightened on his chair. He must protect his daughter, take care of her. Work. . . .

He knew some law from his general reading and the liberal statute of Indiana still permitted any person of good moral character to practice it; but there were examinations that got around the statute somehow. Without a legal education he couldn't practice, and he was too old to debase himself by settling down to study like a beardless boy.

Business? Not for Ruth, of course; but could he go down into the business world himself? Could he accept the presidency of some corporation, engage himself in a strife of wits with competitors, perhaps with his own associates, over money? Not with his standards to which his lifelong integrity and abstinence from struggle had been a monument. In such competition the least scrupulous prevailed. There would be sharp practice in which he would not indulge. He could hear his board of directors telling him to do something his conscience disapproved. "No, gentlemen. I am not accustomed to that sort of thing. If the standards of your president displease you, seem too impracticably honorable for the

world of business as it is to-day, you may have my resignation."

That was what it would come to. He couldn't do it.

Write leading articles, perhaps, for a newspaper? But that meant daily attendance at an office, or at the very least submission to the suggestions of men imbued with the notions of this modern age that he would not stoop to understand. He couldn't do it. And, even if he could, would it leave him time to complete his history of Hollis County?

As he had told Ruth, it was more than the history of a county. It was the history of an age, of a civilization. When published it would astonish the country. As millions suddenly read and admired Henry Adams who had never heard of him till his autobiography was published, so millions would discover Oliver Perry Morton Hollis. They would realize, when they read his work, how far America had drifted. He would give them pause. Already he could see the reviews: "As Gibbon described the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, in pages that will live till time gives place to eternity, so Hollis has depicted the decay of Middle Western culture——"

He had written three hundred and seventy thousand words. To complete the work on the scheme he had projected he must write three hundred thousand more. Impossible to do that with the cares of business hanging on him, or in the daily grind of journalism. Should his life work perish, unfinished, because of the petty demands of immediate

comfort? Were the fleshly needs of the author to deprive America of the reproof and correction which this work would give? No. Ruth would understand. He was a scholar and a man of letters and his life work came first. He must complete the history even at the cost of some personal sacrifice. He must end his life as he had lived it, on a high plane, with no concessions to circumstance. He could do nothing else.

And anything might happen between now and October.

Presently Ruth came out, a Panama hat on her head and a black cloth bag swinging from one wrist.

"I'm going out to the Country Club for a swim," she said.

The Colonel sighed. Only loose-living young men had gone swimming on Sunday when he was young; but customs had altered in this as in other things.

"I haven't seen the car," he remarked, and then looked at her, startled. He had forgotten that Herb and his car and so many other things were no longer part of their lives.

"It does seem funny, doesn't it?" she smiled. "I'd got terribly used to him. What luck we had a quarrel! I'm going out on the trolley and I'll like it just as much. Good-by, father."

He watched her tripping down the steps, then lit another stogy and went back to the Sunday paper.

XV.

Ruth Rediscovers a Lost Art.

THE Hollisburg Country Club wasn't very lively on Sunday mornings. On Sunday afternoon it was always crowded with golfers, tennis players, swimmers, dancers; but though in these modern times most people were lax in church attendance a feeling still survived that if you didn't go to church on Sunday morning you ought to stay at home, sprinkling the lawn, tinkering with the car, or even reading the Sunday paper. There was no harm in getting a little pleasure in the open air on the Sabbath, but not till after dinner. The few Sunday-morning habitués of the club were wicked bachelors who had never gone to church and were believed to drink. As a matter of fact they usually rowed away up the river to fish, or played bridge in one of the upstairs rooms. Still, it was generally felt that before noon on Sunday the club was hardly respectable.

But that didn't disturb Ruth Hollis. She wanted to be alone this morning, after that irritating and futile discussion with her father. She wanted to swim; for in swimming, alone, she usually found a lazy physical comfort that was somehow soothing to the soul. And there was no danger that any of the idlers at the club would annoy her with a compan-

ionship that she didn't want; for people didn't do that sort of thing to Ruth.

She knew that most of Hollisburg thought her morose and uncompanionable. Perhaps she was; but it had its advantages on mornings like this, when she wanted to be alone with her thoughts. And she, at any rate, could swim alone at the club on Sunday morning without making talk. There was that much advantage in a reputation for unsociability.

As she changed her clothes in the bathing house she reflected that even this pleasure would be taken away next year, if they stayed in Hollisburg. The club dues were only five dollars a year, thanks to an endowment provided by St. Elmo Pence; but where she and her father could find five dollars, after their mortgages were foreclosed, she didn't know. However, that was next year; and this was a fine summer morning when a good-looking, healthy girl of twenty-one couldn't stay blue very long. She ran out into the open, climbed to the highest of the three springboards, did a perfect twenty-five-foot swan dive into the pool, and swam away downstream.

The last of her worries gradually drifted away from her as the warm water rippled around her shoulders and the sun shone hot on her red cap. Perhaps her father was right; something would turn up. And at any rate it didn't matter just now, for it was beautiful weather, and she was young, and she had got rid of Herb Pence forever and ever. It gave her the shivers to think that yesterday evening she had still been looking forward to a lifetime spent with Herb. Brrrh! She drove on with quick crawling strokes, sprinting for a hundred yards till she

had Herb off her mind, then turned over to swim lazily on her back.

The pool was broader, here, and flanked by slanting banks of concrete, with the marks of earlier and higher water stages left on them. She was approaching the dam. And, rolling over to look about for landmarks, she saw a wet shiny black head thrusting above the surface only a few yards below her. Nick Rexford, treading water, was looking at a sign on the bank which read: "Swimming beyond this point is positively forbidden. By order of the County Commissioners."

Ruth laughed and he turned over to face her.

"I didn't think I'd see you so soon," she said, wondering why she couldn't think of something clever and original which might impress a traveling New Yorker.

"No; isn't it luck?" he agreed. "You see, Sellers brought me out here and then after he'd been in the water for five minutes somebody called him in to take a hand in a bridge game. And I thought I'd do a little exploring. Is the sign to be taken seriously?"

"No," she informed him. "Not now. In flood time, of course; but now the water level must be forty feet below the spillway, and the flow to the sluice gates won't bother you."

"Your lawlessness is charming," he said. "Being within sight of the dam, I gathered that much. What I wanted to know was whether they arrest people who swim on down the pool? I've already had trouble with your police."

"Well," said Ruth cheerfully, "I'm going to swim

down to the dam. If you want to come along and see what happens to me——"

They went on down together, swimming silently and at first slowly. It was Ruth who quickened the pace and then swam on faster and faster as he kept up with her without apparent effort. With the single exception of George Blades she was the best swimmer in town; and an effort begun in mere high spirits was continued when she found herself suddenly determined not to let Rexford beat her. But he did beat her, drawing ahead with unexpected ease as they came into the shadow of the concrete wall that rose, all but perpendicular, fifty feet above the water. She came up to him, breathless, and clung beside him to the iron ladder that rose from the bottom of the reservoir to the parapet high above.

"Pretty good," she gasped.

"I couldn't have done it," he said, "if I hadn't had a year of toughening with the pick and the pitchfork. Are you done up, or would you like to take me up the ladder and show me the sights?"

Ruth was done up, but she wouldn't admit it, even in the prospect of this vertical climb.

"Go ahead," she said. "I'll be right at your heels."

It wasn't easy, but they both made it and presently found themselves on the concrete roadway, twelve feet wide and walled in by parapets, along the top of the dam. Off to the left, near the end of the dam, the concrete dropped suddenly ten feet, leaving a broad spillway for use in time of flood, with an iron bridge carrying the road across it. On the other end was a little concrete cabin, the gate-

house at the top of the tower in which was the machinery of the sluices.

The concrete was hot under their bare feet as they crossed to the farther parapet and looked down the outsloping face of the dam to the river, passing out through the lower sluices, seventy feet below.

"We used to have a flood every spring till this was built," Ruth told him. "Sometimes the water came clear over Main Street; what's Pence's Addition now was always under. But that's all over and done with since the reservoir was built. It was a great thing for the town—only a little bit hard on people who owned property on the hill."

"It gave you a good swimming pool, anyway," said Rexford. "Must be more than a mile long."

She nodded.

"When I was a little girl, just learning to swim, we used to have to hunt miles up and down the river for a swimming hole in summer. But this is great."

He grinned at her genially.

"I'll say so."

They regarded each other, squinting in the bright light, but smiling. Nobody would know to-day that they both plied the broom for a living; in the democracy of the swimming suit they belonged to the aristocracy of the young and graceful. Ruth had taken off her rubber cap, and the breeze stirred her curly bobbed hair; Rexford wanted to run his fingers through it. Hastily he said:

"Only one thing needed to make it perfect—I wish I had a cigarette. Do you suppose there's anybody over there in the engine house, or whatever you call it, who would be charitable?"

"There's nobody there but a watchman," said Ruth, "but he'd be charitable." She knew, for he had once worked for her father. And they found him seated on the shady side of the gatehouse, an elderly man in brown shirt and trousers.

"Hello, Peter," said Ruth. "Mr. Nash, this is Mr. Rexford. He wants to borrow a cigarette."

"I got the makin's," Nash offered. Rexford accepted them, and rolled one.

"How's everything?" Ruth asked.

"Ain't so bad. Twenty-eight foot of water this morning. Most we ever had in August. And the fish bit pretty well before the sun got so high."

Rexford blew out a puff of smoke and laughed.

"Is that all you have to do—measure the reservoir and then go fishing?"

"Oh, no," said Nash reproachfully. "I got to mind the sluices."

"They're kept open all the time," Ruth explained.

"Now, Miss Ruth, that's true, and again it ain't. There's three pairs of them gates. Go around back there and you can see the upper ones and the middle ones. The lowest pair is kept open all the time, but when it's high water we need the others. If they didn't have us watchmen here then, Hollisburg would be swamped just like Johnstown."

Ruth peered around the corner of the gatehouse, and down.

"Peter, you're bluffing. The water's twelve feet below the middle pair."

"Yes, but we might have a spell of rainy weather or something. Winters and springs, when the

water's high, there's three of us here all the time; but in summer the county saves money—one at a time's enough."

"My idea of the perfect job," said Rexford.

"Well, now, it ain't so easy as you think. Got to go down through the inspection gallery in the very bowels of this here dam once a day. Climbin' up and down ladders at my age—and it's damp inside there for a man with a touch of rheumatism. Ain't so bad for me, at that; I live back here on the hill and I go home nights. But Crissey, that's the night man, he says he's goin' to quit. Says it's too lonesome here all by himself, with nothin' to do but play solitaire and listen to the bullfrogs. He sent word to the county commissioners they'd have to give him an assistant, so's he could play seven-up, or else pay him more money, or he'd quit. I ain't heard what they done about it. No, sir, this is a lonesome job and it ain't every man that's got the heart to stand it. Well, so long, Miss Ruth. Mighty glad you're lookin' so well. My respects to the Colonel."

"There!" said Ruth, as they tiptoed away on the hot concrete. "Why don't you get the night watchman's job, instead of working for Sellers?"

"There's a good deal to be said for it," he admitted. "But not enough labor in it for me."

"You sound as if you like work."

"No, it isn't that. I——" He stopped; he had told one resident of Hollisburg about that will and that was enough.

"Yes," said Ruth. "Go on. I know there's something back of all this, even if it isn't a book on sociol-

ogy. Because if you're a Phi Chi you could get better jobs in town than Sellers could give you. I know it's none of my business——"

He sat on the parapet, looking at her quizzically.

"It's nothing much," he said. "I just had to promise that I'd put in a year of manual labor before I tried anything else."

She knew this wasn't all, but it was evidently all he was going to tell.

"And it's spoiled you for being a broker," she added. "What a shame!"

"Not at all. Broking for those who like to broke; but not for me. I'm almost inclined to become a farmer; I like it."

Ruth considered him very soberly.

"I think you're an awfully good sport," she announced. "Because it means so much more to like something like this, when it's been dropped on you suddenly—I mean, it's not as if your prosperity was so far back in ancient history that you never knew what it was like—so that it sounds like the Arabian Nights or something."

"Luck," he assured her. "I happen to be fairly strong and I happen to like simple harmless occupations like pitching hay. But I can think of a lot of men I used to know, who, if they'd been turned out to manual labor as I was, wouldn't have liked it and could never have liked it. The gentleman who wished it on me thought it would be a good stiff penance for all my sins. Manual labor, with no money back of it—making a living by manual labor—was the worst punishment he could think of. And for most fellows like me it would have been.

Only I can't help thinking that he probably isn't getting much fun out of heaven if he knows that I happened to take to work."

Ruth laughed—a long musical peal that died away suddenly as it sounded in her own ears. For she was reflecting, with wonder, that she hadn't laughed like that for months. She had never laughed like that with Herb; such laughter as he provoked was ironic or contemptuous. There was no doubt about it—it was beautiful weather and there was no use worrying about troubles that wouldn't be acute till October.

"You'd think we were the only people in the world who had ever used a broom, to hear us talk," she observed. "But I suppose at twenty-one we all think the world owes us a lazy man's job. Oh, well! That's a nice dizzy ladder, but I can climb down it without a tumble if you can. We'd better be getting back to the club; I have to go home and start dinner."

XVI.

Blades Sows the Wind.

SUNDAY was of course the busiest day of the week at George Blades' garage. This particular Sunday seemed likely to be particularly busy, so far as could be judged from the early-morning business; and Rufe, overseeing the colored boys, was accordingly distressed when Blades, who lived at the hotel, made a casual appearance shortly after ten o'clock in white flannels, silk shirt and Panama hat. It was plain that he didn't mean to do any work this morning.

"Where the hell are you goin'?" Rufe demanded.

"Me?" Blades grinned. "I'm going to church with my girl and her family, like a good citizen."

"You're gettin' to be too much of a good citizen," Rufe grumbled, "to keep your eye on business."

Blades lit a cigarette with lazy nonchalance before he shook his head.

"No, Rufe. You're all right, but you've got no —what do they call it?—vision. You can't see ahead of the day's receipts. I'm playing a bigger game; and you'll get your percentage. Say! We were talking about this Rexford."

"Yeh?"

"I think you said you were going to get him."

"*We* said *we* were goin' to get him," Rufe corrected.

"Well, we're not—no, no, don't get hot. Mr. Rexford will be got, all right; but we won't need to do it. Somebody else will do it."

"Who?"

"Leave it to me," said Blades.

"You mean Herb Pence," Rufe conjectured. "Hell, George, he can't blow his own nose."

"You don't know him. He'll fight when he has to. Besides, he isn't just Herb Pence. He's Herb Pence with a million dollars and all the drag of this town behind him. Anyway, give me a little time and I think I can frame something. If I can't, you can try your hand. So long, Rufe. Don't work too hard."

"This is a fine day for you to leave me flat."

"I'm working for the firm," Blades grinned. "And what I expect to do is a trifle more important."

Mr. Blades dutifully appeared at church with Leila and St. Elmo Pence—Herb was staying at home, as usual. Mr. Blades also sang the hymns with fervor and in general displayed an enthusiasm that, forty years earlier, might have persuaded the congregation that he had been well saved. In these modern times Hollisburg was more skeptical. If a young business man who was going to be married suddenly displayed an unexpected enthusiasm for religion, church-going Hollisburg gave the credit to his girl and didn't expect his zeal to last long after the wedding.

However, St. Elmo Pence went up to the bank

after church to look over his mail—a weekly habit —and Blades walked home with Leila through Pence's Addition.

"Something's the matter with Herb and Ruth," she told him. "He's cross as a bear this morning. When they drove off last night I thought they were going to fix everything up—you know Ruth is standoffish. But evidently they didn't."

Blades laughed silently.

"They certainly didn't. I don't know what happened, but Ruth came back to town, early, by herself. And Sellers' office boy took her home."

"What?" This was too much for Leila.

"It's a fact. A man who doesn't make mistakes saw them and told me."

"Well, I never! George, he'll never speak to her again."

"Won't he? You know Herb."

"Well, Herb's proud, at any rate," said his sister. "He wouldn't take anything like that."

"Wouldn't he?" Blades looked at her wistfully. "I'd take worse than that from you, if there was any chance of getting you back."

"Oh, well"—Leila's glance was amorous enough to suit anybody—"we're different. And I'm so glad, George. You know, I never could understand Ruth. People think I'm her best friend; but she hasn't any friends. Why, she never told me a thing; and I used to tell her everything. Oh, no; I don't any more. But she was always close-mouthed and prissy. I don't believe she ever cared much for Herb."

"She wouldn't be such a fool as to chuck him for good," Blades suggested.

"She might. You don't know her, George. She isn't like anybody else. I always feel that she's laughing at me. And goodness knows what right she's got to laugh at anybody, living up there in that ruin with her old puff of a father."

"So you think she's through with Herb," Blades mused. "Well, well. Then how about us?"

"What about us?" said Leila archly.

"You put off naming a day," said Blades, "because we figured on a double wedding. But if Herb and Ruth are off—little lady, I'm crazy about you. You know that—don't you? And I hate to wait any longer."

Leila walked on with eyes downcast. Then:

"So do I," she admitted breathlessly. "If—if you want to——"

"I want to," said Blades. "Oh, I know we haven't built our house yet."

"Pooh! What difference does that make? Father will give us that corner lot—we know that. We can get married and then build the house. Anyway, you know he'd like to have us live with him; his house is big enough for an army. We can do that while we're building our own."

"You're the most wonderful girl in the world," said Blades.

"You're kind of wonderful yourself," Leila admitted shyly. "I'm so sorry for Herb."

"Well, don't rub it in on him," Blades counseled. "We can leave him to himself."

However, when Blades and Herb were smoking on the porch after two o'clock dinner—St. Elmo Pence having retired to his study to look over the Louisville and Indianapolis papers, and Leila being engrossed in one of her interminable telephone conversations with a girl of her age and set—Blades took a chance on the lack of confidence between Herb and his sister.

"Cheer up!" he advised, grinning over his cigar. "She was only doing it to make you sore."

"Doin' what?" Herb growled, with a pretense of innocence.

"Letting the office boy take her home."

"What?" Herb sat up with an unaccustomed suddenness. "Now you tell me just what you meant by that!"

"Why, I supposed you knew. After you and Ruth had your row last night——"

"What do you know about that?"

"Not much. But I know that when your girl comes to town alone—by trolley, I suppose—and then lets this Rexford pick her up on Main Street and walk home with her——"

Herb swore with fluency and enthusiasm. He said things about Rexford and things about Ruth—things that Blades himself, in the height of anger, would hardly have said about anybody. There was a limit to all things. But when Herb had sworn himself out he descended suddenly to a rather piteous:

"Gosh, George, do you think she means it?"

"Ask me," Blades evaded. "I never could make the girl out."

"Well, neither could I. She's queer. But damn

it all, I want her. Yes, I know you think I'm a boob, and probably I am. But I want her. George, you heard her say he'd been up at her house for dinner. What do you make out of that?"

Blades admitted that he was puzzled.

"He went up to cut the grass," he explained. "Sellers sent him up as a joke on the old man—you know their front yard. At least, that was what I thought. But I'm not so sure now. Something queer about that fellow, Herb."

"There certainly is."

"Of course, he seems to be a Phi Chi," Blades went on. "I don't belong to your frat, so I don't know whether he is or not. I've heard of a guy picking up a pin and getting hold of a password or two—— Has anybody investigated him?"

"Sellers."

"Oh!" said Blades ironically. "Sellers, eh? Well, that's different."

"What do you mean?"

"Herb, it looks mighty queer to me. What does Sellers want with an office boy? We saw this bird on the road and he was a hobo. No doubt about that. Ruth saw him, too. She doesn't run to hobos or office boys, anyway. Something wrong."

"Sellers said something about a book."

"So he did. Well, maybe that's it. Not that you'd think anybody could write a book about Hollisburg, but I guess maybe one of these soreheads that like to knock small towns might do it. And if he wants to get any knocks I imagine Colonel Hollis would be the one to hand them out."

"You think that's it?"

"No, I don't; for Sellers wouldn't have said it if it had been true."

"No, the dirty knocker."

"I don't know what it is," Blades went on. "Sometimes I've thought—well, you know a lot of cars have been stolen down the line, at Vernon and Adamsville. Whatever you say against this Sellers, he's a tricky lawyer; and if a man from down there got in trouble——"

Herb nodded.

"Rexford looks as if he might be mixed up in something like that," he agreed. "But then——"

"Well!" Blades shrugged. "I don't know who he is or what his business is. Only if a girl of mine had chucked me and gone right from me to him, I'd —oh, well, Herb, I don't believe she meant to chuck you. After all, we all know about those mortgages."

"Uh!" Herb growled. "We'll see."

Later in the afternoon he found his father alone, in a hammock on the lawn.

"I suppose you've heard the news," said Herb doggedly.

"What news?"

Herb told him and was half pleased, half angered at his father's look of relief.

"Well?" said St. Elmo Pence. "What of it?"

"I'll show her," Herb vowed.

"I should think," said his father, "that you'd be glad to be out of it. What did you ever see in her, Herb? At my age I can judge a woman by something besides her looks and her dancing; and I must say I never saw anything in that Hollis girl. Sullen—conceited—thinks she's better than everybody else,

living off there on the hill with that old dead-beat of a father that I've kept for the last ten years. Let her go."

Herb shook his head.

"I'll show her," he said. "Oh, yes, I know you think I'm wishy-washy and all that; but I'm not. I know what I want. I want her—I want to show her who's who around here. Teach her not to laugh at us."

"Us?" said St. Elmo Pence.

"Oh, she's always saying something mean and sneering about the way things are run around Hollisburg. Never comes out in the open."

"Ah! I guess her father puts her up to that. The old windbag! Wait till October, Herb. I'll set them right out in the street; then we'll see if anybody else will pay for their keep, when I've quit. Only—I don't like bringing her into the family."

"Well, I'll show her," Herb insisted. "And this Rexford. What do you suppose he wants to write in a book about Hollisburg? There are lots of knockers these days that think it's clever to rip up the small towns."

"I know it," said St. Elmo Pence. "Think that's it?"

"It might be that. It might be most anything else."

"Well, son, I'll stand by you. And so will Frank Flint if you get anything on this man Rexford. Only be careful. And—there are other fish in the sea, son."

"I want to make this one feel the hook," said Herb vindictively.

XVII.

Futile Journeyings of Mr. Sellers.

THE news that Ruth had broken off her affair with Herb didn't get around immediately. Neither Pences nor Hollises felt like talking about it; and George Blades and Nick Rexford, the only other people who knew, kept silent for their own reasons. But a dozen people had seen Ruth and Rexford swimming together on Sunday morning; a hundred people had observed that neither she nor Herb appeared in the afternoon. When Monday night came and all Hollisburg flocked to the movie theaters to see the opening bill Herb was there and Ruth wasn't. Then Hollisburg began to talk.

But Hollisburg had a good deal to talk about already. On Monday morning Clay Sellers, who had repulsed automobile salesmen for twenty years, went down to the Ford agency and bought himself a new touring car with all the trimmings; and within an hour after that he was seen on the river road, learning from Nick Rexford how to drive it. That in itself was a considerable piece of news for a quiet summer in Hollisburg; but there was more by noon, when it became known that George Blades had turned in to the chief of police a car which he suspected had been stolen.

The story of his cleverness spread and grew. He had bought it from a citizen of Vernon who had looked all right; the bill of sale seemed to be in proper form; but the license number was later found to have been tampered with, and when he had looked up the seller he had discovered that no such person was known in Vernon.

It was rumored that Flint had evidence that a gang working out of Louisville was responsible for the thefts all along the river. As in the case of this car sold to Blades, somebody would come to a town, steal an automobile, sell it in the next town, and go back to Louisville. Everybody agreed that this was smart; but Blades and Flint were smart enough to break up the gang. Hollisburg, talking it over at the Chamber of Commerce, the Country Club, the soda fountain, came to the conclusion that Blades and Flint would do for Adamsville and Vernon what Adamsville and Vernon hadn't been able to do for themselves. Another triumph for Hollisburg.

On Tuesday afternoon Sellers told Rexford that they would get out the Ford and drive down to Vernon.

"All my life I've been goin' to that town," he explained, "but I never drove there in an automobile. When I go out spinnin' with other people it's always over the hills; along the river you can go quicker by the railroad. But now that I've joined the great majority and own my own car, blamed if I don't feel like goin' down there in state. You got your license all right?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, Pence the same as owns the courthouse,

and I thought some of them fellows there might be mean to you just because you worked for me. I ain't goin' to apply till I know that car as well as I know the criminal statutes of this State; for if they got a chance to trip me up they'd do it. I know 'em."

They drove off up the river, past the dam and the Country Club; past a cut in the hillside just beyond, where a gang of laborers was at work and the sound of blasting came from near at hand.

"Cuttin' through a new line for the interurban," Sellers explained. "Straighten it out or something. More of Pence's modern improvements—oh, yes, he owns a whack of the interurban stock, too. Greatest man to straighten out the visible face of the earth I ever saw; but when it comes to straightenin' out internal crookedness he ain't so eager.

"What? Oh, crookedness in others, I mean. Pence ain't crooked himself, consciously. He lives up to his lights, but they're blame dim. In fact, friend Rexford, he's one of the examples by which I'd prove to anybody that the virtue of sincerity is greatly overrated, if there was anybody but you to listen to me. Trouble with talkin' to you is you're convinced of most sensible things already. I'd rather cast my seed on stony ground than waste it on what's growin' a full crop without my ministrations."

"We haven't had much time to talk philosophy the last day or two," Rexford reminded him. "You seem pretty busy."

"Showin' my faith by my works," said Sellers with a grin. "Yes, I've been busy. But maybe the

rush will be over pretty soon. Likely I'll be able to settle down for a good long talk—about the time you go back to New York."

"I suppose I will go back to New York," said Rexford absently.

"Yes," Sellers agreed, "I reckon you will." And presently he began to sing in an undertone—

> "The steamboat's comin' around the bend,
> Good-by, my lover, good-by——"

Rexford stared at him suspiciously. What did he mean by that? A man had a right to go back to New York, surely; nor was Nick Rexford in love with anybody. . . . Besides, Ruth Hollis was thinking of going to New York. . . .

Vernon looked very much like Hollisburg, in its downtown sections at least, except that it was obviously slower and less progressive. It had no Pence.

"Now I've got some business up around the courthouse," said Sellers, "that may take me a couple of hours. Anyway, you might just as well go to a movie and pick me up there at half past four. I suppose we got to lay this car up in a garage or somebody will run off with it."

"You leave that to me," said Rexford. "I'll fix it so nobody can carry it off without taking a tow."

He made the car safe and sought amusement. He wasn't much inclined to a movie, but there seemed to be nothing else to do in Vernon; so finally he settled down at the local theater and spent a morose hour and a half watching a Broadway film and wondering why anybody migrated to New York when

it was so badly misrepresented by the advertisements.

Sellers went down, meanwhile, to the courthouse; but he didn't go in. On the steps, by a curious coincidence, he encountered B. F. Crisler. They greeted each other as casual acquaintances might; and then, since there was nobody in earshot, Crisler grunted:

"This a nuisance, getting together in out-of-the-way corners. I suppose now we've got to hunt some place in a back alley before we can talk."

"I don't think so. Come around here to this bench behind the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. There —I thought so. Nobody in sight. And if we sit down here for a little smoke, nobody will talk about it. Vernon isn't as curious as Hollisburg."

"I know it," said Crisler. "I came down here this morning as accredited agent of a perfectly good sanitarium and nobody but the mayor and the president of the bank paid any attention to me. You live in a live town."

"It'll be liver when you get through with it," Sellers chuckled.

"Maybe. This thing isn't easy. I've checked up on Blades' story. It holds water. So far, he's an innocent receiver and he takes the loss. Things look a good deal worse for him from the Cincinnati end, but there's nothing even there that we can pin on him. Of course, if it were an ordinary case, we could bull right in and find out; but evidently it can't be done that way in Hollisburg."

"Not while Blades is engaged to Pence's daughter," Sellers agreed. "Unless we can make out a pretty good prima facie case all the weight of Pence's

influence would be thrown for Blades. And against me. I told you I wasn't the man you wanted."

"You're the only man in Hollisburg I could work with at this stage of the case. Oh, I think we can pin it on him sooner or later; and I suppose if we had conclusive proof even Pence would throw him over. But we'll have to go slowly; we'll have to waste time. And that means that he can get away with quite a good deal more stuff through his other outlets before we can get him. If he doesn't get away himself."

"No use counting on Frank Flint," Sellers warned him. "Or the sheriff. Not till we've got the goods, if then."

"And I suppose there's no use counting on bringing outside pressure to bear, with Pence so strong in State politics."

Sellers removed his pipe and blew a smoke cloud out into the breeze.

"I hadn't thought of that," he observed. "Pence is such a big man in Hollis County that we get to forgetting he don't own the earth. Yes, he *is* strong in State politics—with the legislature. But he ain't so strong with the Governor. Pence was for Ott for governor; he kept Hollis County votin' for Ott even on the last ballot, when all the rest of the convention was stampeding for Wimborough. And I imagine that in case of a scandal in Hollis County the Honorable Colfax Wimborough would give Elmo Pence strict justice—no less and no more."

Crisler drew a long breath.

"I didn't know that," he confessed. "Things look better."

"They'll look better yet when you get some real evidence," Sellers added. "And the sooner the quicker."

Crisler nodded.

"If for no other reason," he said, "because we can't keep up this hole-and-corner business much longer. If people are going to see us together they'd better see us together in the open."

"That ain't the only inconvenience," said Sellers, "that I suffer from bein' right across the street from Blades' garage. They keep hammerin' away there all night. I used to wonder why."

"Can you trust your chauffeur?" Crisler asked.

"Why, I reckon so. If I can't there's no such thing as gratitude."

"Gratitude, Mr. Sellers, is mighty scarce. I only thought that this boy has a better chance to see what we're up to——"

"Don't you worry about him," Sellers advised. "I think he's all right; but even if he ain't, he's in wrong with the Pences. Besides, I kind of think he's got a girl on his mind too strong to think of anything else. I don't know him well enough to let him in on this, so he can't be much help to us; but he won't be a hindrance."

"I wish you knew him better," said Crisler glumly. "We need all the help we can get."

They parted and Sellers made occupation for himself about the courthouse until Rexford brought the car around at half past four. Both were silent on the way home; Sellers, indeed, was heavily silent. Because they would have to go slowly and be very sure of every step, Blades would have time to cover

his tracks. He was going to marry Leila Pence; and Sellers, though he knew the curious quirks of the criminal mind, couldn't imagine that anybody who was going to inherit a slice of the Pence fortune could be foolish enough to continue his entanglement in only moderately profitable crime. They would be too late; and Blades and the Pences would continue their reign.

In this mood it annoyed Sellers that he had to store his car in Blades' garage until he could build a place for it in his own back yard. But there was nothing else to do; and he might have felt better if he had known that Blades and Rufe were a good deal more annoyed than he. For them, too, there was no alternative; they could think of no plausible and unsuspicious excuse for keeping Sellers' car out. Rexford dropped Sellers at the corner and drove on into the garage, to find himself blocked in the doorway by another car whose driver was arguing fiercely with Rufe.

"What did you have the gate locked for, then? Of course I'd've druv it into the back lot if the gate had been open, but——"

He stopped as Rexford sounded his horn, and looked back—a big man with a shock of bushy yellow hair. Then, still swearing, he got out of the way, and Rexford thought no more of him until he and Sellers came into Cullen's lunch counter for supper to find the bushy-haired one and Rufe just going out.

"Who's that fellow?" Rexford asked.

"The little brother of the Seven Sutherland Sisters? Fellow named Raney. He rents the old Miller place, up on the edge of the hill above town. Why?"

"I saw him in the garage this afternoon. Just wondered."

"Huh! He's comin' up in the world, runnin' up garage bills for that old third hand Ford he drives. I hear he mends it with a needle and thread and carries his gas out from town in a milk bottle."

Rexford said nothing, for it was none of his business, and probably it wasn't important anyway. But he remembered that Raney's car that blocked him in the doorway had been a new Dodge.

XVIII.

More Profitable Excursions of Mr. Blades's Partner.

BY Wednesday Herb Pence's friends were kidding him, with the primitive fierceness that Hollisburg custom still tolerated in such matters, about his girl throwing him over for Sellers' office boy. He took it in sullen silence—ominous silence, since he didn't respond to the merry jestings even of men who were smaller than himself.

The truth was that even yet Herb could hardly believe that Ruth was really through with him. He hadn't seen her since Saturday night; one or two telephone conversations she had cut off with the curt statement that she had nothing more to say. And a muddled, angry young man whose whole life had taught him that unpleasant things couldn't be true wasn't willing to believe the inflated stories he heard about her interest in Rexford.

In other quarters, however, romance was looking up. Blades came into the garage office on Wednesday morning whistling a wedding march.

"'S far's that, eh?" Rufe grunted.

"You said it, Rufus. The invitations will be out next week. Married on the twenty-third. I break the glad news to you first, buddy."

"Yeh, that's kind of you. Got it all settled, eh? Where do you live?"

"With Pence till we get around to building a house for ourselves."

"Goin' on a honeymoon?"

"The Thousand Islands."

"Canada!"

Rufe's face drove Blades to laughter.

"You've got the worst case of nerves in the world," he said lightly. "Why the devil should I beat it to Canada? Hollisburg is my town, from now on. I settle down and become a leading citizen. So do you."

"Got it all fixed, ain't you?"

"Of course it's all fixed, you boob. I go in with Pence—the real estate end. You take the garage. Give me notes for it and if you ever pay them you're a bigger fool than I think. Well, aren't you going to wish me a happy life with my charming bride and my thriving father-in-law?"

"Ain't got time," said Rufe. "Just got a call for a repair job on one of their trucks out at the construction camp up the line. They don't want to lose time bringin' it in; said they'd pay me all right for comin' out. Guess if I'm goin' to be sole owner of this here garage I got to cultivate my trade."

But he cursed silently as he drove out up the river in his little repair truck. To the last he hadn't believed that Blades was really going to marry this girl. Of course, there was money in it. That was the worst of the whole affair—it was so sensible. Naturally, Blades would marry half a million and settle down when he got the chance.

That it meant the disruption of a partnership that had counted for more than anything else had ever

counted in Rufe's life didn't seem to trouble Blades. He went his own way and threw a few scraps of bounty to Rufe, as he could afford. If it had suited his convenience better he would have double-crossed Rufe—or, at least, so Rufe thought in his black musings this morning. In their partnership of give and take Blades had done most of the taking and Rufe most of the giving; yet because they were such a good team they had worked together in a score of cities before they came to this hick town where Blades had been lured away.

The older man had feared this for a long time. Blades was smarter; Blades could go about in society, or at least in what looked like society to Rufe; Blades had a way with the women. Rufe was good only for the rough work. But Blades needed him as he needed Blades and they might have stuck together if they hadn't settled in Hollisburg—if it hadn't been for this town, and for St. Elmo Pence, who was going to be Blades' next partner.

By the time he started back to town, his repair job finished, Rufe's first fierce anger had dulled to a sullen cold resentment. He'd show 'em, if they got fresh with him. Thought they could push him around this way and that, did they; make him settle down in this hick burg when he'd been thinking for six months it was time to move on to Chicago.

Where the highway that led across the top of the dam joined the turnpike there was an interurban stop; and Rufe saw a man waiting for the next car, a familiar figure. It was Crissey, the night watchman at the dam; and Rufe, who had collaborated

with Crissey in certain low amusements, stopped and invited him to get in.

"What you doin' out here this time of day?" he asked.

"Come for my stuff," said Crissey, flinging a bag into the truck. "I've quit my job. Told 'em last week I'd quit if they didn't give me a helper, or more money; but them tightwads on the county board wouldn't do it. Pence put 'em up to that, damn him. All this talk of economy and efficiency is his stuff, and they wouldn't give me a ten-dollar raise. Let 'em see if anybody else would work out there for sixty-five a month."

"Gets lonesome of nights, don't it?"

"Lonesome? Say! But I don't mind that. It's dangerous. When you take to climbin' down through them manholes and into the inspection gallery with not a soul within call—suppose you fell and broke your neck? Who'd hear you? Who'd care? Not Pence. No, Rufe, it ain't a job fit for human beings. I told 'em. I said to 'em, 'See if anybody else will take it.' If it was winter they'd've come through, mighty quick. But they know in summer there ain't a chance of gettin' enough water in the reservoir even to open the middle sluices, so what do they care? Rather let the thing watch itself of nights than pay a fellow decent wages. You know it's a mean job, Rufe; you been down them manholes with me. It ain't safe, is it? Say, have you got any hooch?"

"Come down to the garage," said Rufe, "and I'll give you a bottle. No, I don't want nothing for it; I can afford to make my friends a present, can't I?"

He certainly could. For Crissey's story had opened up certain trains of thought. He remembered the construction of the dam pretty well; he had gone down through the manholes, inside. And he remembered something else—something he had seen that afternoon at the construction camp. A loosely built board shanty with a big red sign—*Danger—Explosives—No smoking.* And a door ajar, with a rusty padlock clinging to the hasp—a padlock obviously not in use. They'd better be careful what they did to old Rufe.

Clay Sellers, after midday dinner, had told Rexford he was going back to Vernon.

"Got some railroad business down there that's more trouble than it's worth," he explained. "No, don't get the car out. I know what it feels like now, but I can make it quicker on the accommodation."

"You simply won't let me work," Rexford complained. "Here I've got all your books unwrapped, and sorted out, and settled on the shelves; and I'm halfway through the catalogue. And I don't believe you've looked at one of them since I started."

"Oh, yes I have. Not intensively, because I've been busy. But I've had time to get surprised at my own extravagance, buyin' more than I'll have time to read in the next forty years. By the way, I see you've got that old copy of 'The Pioneers' catalogued as a first edition."

"Isn't it? I checked up the year of first publication——"

"I picked that up at a second hand store in Cin-

cinnati," said Sellers, "for seventy-five cents. No bookseller that knew his business would have sold it for that if it had been a first edition. On the other hand, I wouldn't have bought it if it had cost much more. I buy books for what's in 'em, not for when they were printed. I tell you what—I'll give you something to do this afternoon. Colonel Hollis has got a first edition of 'The Pioneers.' Take this one up to the house and check up on it, will you? If I did get more than my money's worth I'd like to know it; it don't often happen."

Rexford concluded that it would be discreet as well as proper to go to the Colonel's office first. After all, he had established something like a friendship with Ruth without having seen her father after that first night. But the office in the Hollis Building was locked and a neighbor told him that the Colonel had gone down to Adamsville to look up some early records on the location of the county line, which were of some importance to the famous history.

He tried to call Ruth up, for it wouldn't be much fun to climb the hill on this hot afternoon only to find her out; but the telephone was out of order. So at last he set out, his book under his arm, on the road he had traveled only last Friday. Five days. A good deal had happened in those five days; he had had several pieces of undeserved and amazing good fortune. And if they didn't bring him the proper amount of satisfaction it was because he was worried about the Hollises.

Somehow he couldn't fit the old Colonel into New York, at his time of life. It could be done if he had money; almost anything could be done if you

had money. Ruth would fit into New York, as she would fit anywhere—without the Colonel. But the old man would be an almost impossible handicap. Ruth could make a start, but the Colonel was through—through before he had ever got started.

Back here on the hill, in the atmosphere of these old houses and old trees, Rexford found that pathetic. The Colonel might be ridiculous; he might be wearing out Ruth's life without knowing it; but it was sad to think of his distinguished gifts and distinguished presence being wasted, sad to think of him as the last helpless bearer of an honored name. Sadder still to think that the only thing that could have saved him was work. And it was too late for the Colonel to work now.

Automatically, Rexford pulled at the front-door bell before he remembered that it was broken. Then he rapped, long and hard. From behind the drawn shades Ruth's voice called:

"Come in."

Blinking in the half light, he followed her voice from the entrance hall to the parlor, a huge dim room dominated by two great inverted-Christmas-tree chandeliers of cut-glass pendants. From in front of the fireplace and its marble mantelpiece Ruth, on hands and knees, looked up at him—clad in her old blue sweater and a dingy skirt, a cloth around her hair, with a bucket of water beside her and a scrubbing brush in her hand.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I always seem to be interrupting you."

She flushed, but smiled gallantly.

"I thought you were the man coming to fix the

telephone. He knows where it is, so he'd have gone right on into the library and left me to my labors."

"I came on an errand for my boss," Rexford explained, "which will take about two minutes. And I'm free for the rest of the afternoon. So if you have another scrubbing brush I'd like to help you."

"I don't need help."

"I didn't mean to—to break in on you like this," he said rather tensely, "but I do want to help you."

"I know," she said, rising, with a smile that made him wonder how he had ever thought her face was sullen. "But I was just scrubbing the mantelpiece and I'm almost through. After all, we knew the worst about each other from the start, didn't we?"

She bit her lip; that wasn't what she had meant to say. Why was she talking of a start as if she were thinking of a finish?

"What's the errand?" she went on hastily.

"I want to look at a book—compare it with one Sellers bought."

"Well, that isn't much of an afternoon's work, is it?"

"You won't send me away, will you?"

"Why," said Ruth, "if you'll wait till I clean up and put on something respectable you may call on me—if you want to."

"I can beat that," said Rexford. "I've been put up for the Country Club by Norman Kane. Meanwhile, Sellers has given me a guest card. So I can invite you out for a swim—if——"

"No ifs," said Ruth. "We'll look at that book—then I'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

XIX.

Explosion of Unseemly Passions.

FROM his window on the second floor of the bank building Herb Pence saw them taking the trolley. Ruth had the black cloth bag which, he knew, carried her bathing suit; and as they waited she danced lightly from one foot to the other as if she were really enjoying herself. He hadn't seen her behave like that for a year. It was too much. She couldn't be really enjoying Rexford's company, of course; she must be flaunting her intimacy with him before the eyes of Hollisburg only to make Herb ridiculous.

Well, he'd see about that. There were some things they couldn't get away with. Not yet. Frank Flint had done nothing to restore the natural order of decently organized society which Rexford's arrival had upset; Blades had done nothing; St. Elmo Pence had done nothing. They had all threatened and all failed. Clay Sellers had been too much for them. Now it was time for Herb Pence to stand up and assert himself, to prove his right to the royal succession, to fall upon Rexford before Clay Sellers could come to his aid, and show him how Hollisburg dealt with suspicious characters.

It was nearly three o'clock—almost closing time at the bank. The vice president wouldn't be needed

any more to-day. Herb locked his desk and strode out to the shady side street where his blue roadster waited at the curb. Time to find out who was who in Hollisburg.

He drove out along the river road, passing the trolley that carried Ruth and Rexford a mile this side of the Country Club. When they got off the trolley and came up the cinder walk toward the clubhouse, Herb was waiting grimly on the porch. They saw him from afar and there was no mistaking his surly determination. Rexford, secure behind his Phi Chi pin, with his guest card in his pocket and his application for membership posted on the bulletin board, only grinned. But Ruth knew Hollisburg. With a little frown, she stood up very straight as she came forward at Rexford's side.

"I want to see you," Herb greeted them.

"Which of us?" asked Rexford cheerfully.

Through the windows of the club lounge he saw three or four men, the leisure class of Hollisburg, staring at them with delighted anticipation, and the colored kitchen help were peering out of the pantry. Whatever Herb meant to do would be done in public.

"I've got nothing to say to you," Herb told him grimly. "You've got no business here. Ruth is the one I want to talk to."

"But I don't happen to want to talk to you," she said serenely, and started past him. He reached out and caught her arm.

Rexford confronted him, stared into his eyes—but didn't know what to do next. This was ridiculous, medieval. If he shook Herb's hand off Ruth's arm he would precipitate a fight, here in public—a fight

which, in the view of Hollisburg, would be a fight over Ruth.

Silly. Nick Rexford had had only one fight since he was twelve years old, and that was with a half-drunken taxi driver when he was half drunk himself on the night of a class battle at Columbia. He didn't want to fight Herb Pence, not even over Ruth Hollis. He liked her, he wanted to help her, but he had no desire to fight for her. Still less, to fight for her in the sense in which the phrase would be understood in Hollisburg. The whole thing was grotesque, nonsensical, barbaric—yet Herb still clutched her arm. And if Herb was going to be ridiculous and medieval something would have to be done about it.

Luckily Ruth saved him the trouble of a decision.

"All right," she said fiercely through set teeth. "You may talk to me if you'll let go my arm, and when you're through talking to me I'll talk to you."

Herb's hand dropped; Rexford hesitantly fell back a step. But it would be stupid to walk away out of earshot, especially as neither of them seemed to care whether he listened or not. Ruth's face had gone dead white under her black hair, a dead white that set off her deep red lips. Nick Rexford, amazed and rather scandalized by her sudden flare-up of cold fury, found himself unreasonably distracted by this arrangement of color, by the amazing, and apparently natural, redness of her mouth. She was an amazing girl anyway. Behind the sullen chill she showed to Hollisburg, the light playfulness she had displayed with him, there were startling depths of passionate ferocity. . . . Then he began to listen.

"Well?" said Herb. "I want to know what you mean."

"I mean what I said Saturday night. I'm through with you."

"What do you mean by running around with this New York sewer rat?"

She laughed—a short little laugh of cold anger.

"None of your business."

"Oh, it isn't, eh? Do you know who he is?"

"I know more than you do."

Nick Rexford shook his head. This was becoming too melodramatic. People simply didn't do such things.

"Well, I know," said Herb fiercely, "that he's just a hobo—a bum. That's why you like him, I guess. Birds of a feather. You and your father have been living on handouts——"

Ruth struck him on the mouth with her open hand. He stepped back, his eyes slowly widening, then lurched forward and caught her arm. He twisted it; she doubled up with pain; a soft long-drawn sigh of agony came through her clenched teeth. And then Nick Rexford, plunging forward through the hot red veil that had flamed up before his eyes, had torn his hand away. He knew why people did such things now.

"Come down on the grass," he said softly. "Try somebody a little nearer your size."

They were none too near the same size, at that; Herb was three inches taller and at least thirty pounds heavier. The added height and reach gave him confidence; the difference in weight gave Rexford confidence, for he thought that most of that

thirty pounds was fat. And, as they threw off their coats, a smile slipped across his face. He had remembered that Herb was a Cornell man. The refrain of a college song ran in his memory—

> Oh, to hell with Pennsylvania,
> And to hell with Cornell too.
> But a cheer for old Columbia,
> And her glorious white and blue.

Somehow it steadied him, in this sudden upset of all his ideas of fitness and propriety, in this universal flaring up of hot passions that ought to be decently dampened down. It gave him a sense of some connection between his forgotten old self and his surprising new self. To fight Herb for Ruth Hollis was medieval and absurd; but to fight him by way of wiping certain football scores out of memory seemed more reasonable. It might be childish but it implied nothing, and Rexford wanted no implications on his mind just now.

Before they had done more than exchange a few easily parried blows each realized that he had underestimated the other. Both were strong; both were skilled boxers. Herb's fat hardly more than neutralized his extra reach; and after a moment each had discovered that the other packed a punch. A hook to the jaw that staggered Rexford, a straight left to the body that all but sent Herb down—and they were circling each other cautiously, their eyes glowing, with a single-minded interest in this fight which had been due for some time and could now be fought out at last.

They didn't notice the growing group of spectators on the porch, who whispered that it ought to

be stopped and grunted with satisfaction when one or the other landed a hard blow; they didn't even notice Ruth, who stood a little apart from the crowd, watching with silent fascination.

It was terrible and vulgar, she knew—two men fighting over her, fighting because she preferred one to the other—for that was what it came down to, after all. Fighting in public, under the eyes of witnesses who would tell the story, with embellishments, all over town. She ought to be shocked and ashamed; she ought to walk away coldly and never speak to either of them again. But she wasn't shocked or ashamed and she wasn't going to walk away. She was going to stay there and watch the fight and she hoped Rexford would kill him.

A quick interchange of blows, a clinch in which Herb pounded his adversary's ribs, a breakaway followed by a terrific swing that would have laid Herb out if he hadn't ducked under it—and then Tom Blakely, who went to all the big fights in Cincinnati, was down between them, pushing them apart.

"That's right," said Cal Truman from the porch. "Damn shame. Stop 'em."

Ruth agreed that it was a shame, but her heart echoed, "Don't stop them." And Blakely wasn't going to stop them; he had his watch out and was telling them to break clean the next time.

The second round was Rexford's. He caught Herb, after a minute or two, with a long right to the jaw that sent him down while Blakely counted eight over him. But he was up again, falling into another clinch almost instantly and hammering Rexford's ribs hard before they broke. A moment, and

Blakely called time; they dropped, panting, while the onlookers repeated that it was a shame and somebody ought to stop them.

Rexford was overconfident this time; Herb caught him with a right to the body and a left to the jaw that sent him down on one knee. Ruth's glowing eyes caught his, and he was up again in an instant, driving Herb back and back. One wallop after another was buried in the shock-absorbing fat of Herb's stomach; but Herb protected the glass jaw and Rexford couldn't break through. Yet Herb obviously was tiring; his fat was too much of a load for this very active fighting; presently he would tire, drop his guard——

Then a big, dripping man in a bathing suit ran around the corner of the porch—a man as big as Jim Jeffries, with a wide angry red face and arms bulging with muscle. Rigdon, the Baptist preacher, who led raids on blind tigers, hounded loose women out of town, and in general regarded himself as the local sword of the Lord. He pushed his way through the ring of spectators who kept repeating in a fascinated daze: "Damn shame. Somebody ought to stop 'em."

"I'll stop them," said Rigdon. He stepped down, shoved Blakely aside, seized one of the fighters in each hand and flung them ten feet away on the grass. He towered over them, big enough and fierce enough to lick them both.

"Outrageous!" he exploded. "Blakely, I'll have you up on charges before the house committee. Is this club to be a decent place or a dive? Answer me. Is it or isn't it?"

"That's right," said three or four of the spectators on the porch. "That's right. We're with you, Mr. Rigdon."

"Yes," said Rigdon with deep disdain, "you're with me now it's all over. I know you. But you——" He turned on Herb, panting and dishevelled; on Rexford, with bruised knuckles and swollen jaw. He wasn't afraid of the Crown Prince (the Pences being Presbyterians).

"Mr. Pence, you ought to be suspended. I'm going to move it myself; and if the committee won't act, I'll—— And you—— I don't know who you are, but you're not a member. If you behave like this where you're a guest, and in the presence of a lady——"

Ruth stepped across to Rexford's side, smiling fiercely.

"I'm not a lady, Mr. Rigdon. I started this fight and I wanted the right side to win. You don't care about that, do you? Whoever fights is wrong, except you when you're fighting bootleggers or breaking up a crap game." She turned to Rexford. "Come on. Let's get out of this."

Behind them as they walked away arose a hubbub of voices arguing, explaining, apologizing; and over them all Herb's loud—

"I'd have got him, I tell you. I'd have licked him in another round. But wait till I catch him——"

Rexford tried to make himself stop trembling. He knew he would have to say something and while there was much to be said he was somehow reluctant to start saying it. Not here.

"My party wasn't much of a success, was it?" he ventured.

"The only thing I regret," said Ruth, "is that you didn't knock his head off. Oh, I'm not a bit nice, not a bit. I wanted you to beat him all to pieces."

"Lucky I didn't, in his home town. But it's too bad we had to start it. People will talk, I suppose——"

"Well?"

"It—it will be rather unpleasant for you, won't it?"

"If nothing more unpleasant than that ever happened to me I'd be pretty lucky," said Ruth as they came out on the road and paused at the trolley stop. "I'll be everlastingly thankful for every blow you hit him. There—does that console you for the spoiling of our party?"

The interurban car swung around the curve toward them, and Rexford discovered that he didn't want to go back to town.

"I—you don't feel like walking, do you?" he asked nervously.

"Not now." She signaled to the motorman. But she was still trembling, too; her eyes wouldn't meet his.

"If," she began hesitantly, "if you really wanted some place to spend the rest of the afternoon—you asked me once to take you up to see the view from the old Miller place."

"I'll ask you again, if necessary."

"We can get off the car just outside of town," she told him as it slowed down to take them on. "Then we'll have to climb the hill; but it's worth it."

"I feel sure it is," said Rexford.

XX.

Repression of More Laudable Sentiments.

"THERE!" said Ruth.

They stood on the edge of the bluff, leaning against a tumble-down rail fence encircling the pasture. To the left was the steep path up which they had climbed from the valley; before them the hill fell away abruptly to the road, the trolley track and the river four hundred feet below. The valley spread out beyond, in broad reaches of corn land, to the woods on the gentler slope of the farther ridge. Up and down, for miles, they could see the river winding between its green-bushed banks; upstream in the distance the white wall of the dam, with the Country Club just visible through the trees beyond; below on the right the red roofs of Pence's Addition, the brick business blocks of the town and the dark green wall of the forest on the Elm Street hill rising above them.

Far in the west leaden cloud masses were piling up; there were distant murmurs, hardly sounds as yet, of thunder; rays from the hidden sun struck down to the shadowed earth. The half shadow, midway between daylight and twilight, subdued the garish buffness of the scattered blocks of stubble field, drew out the deep green-gray shadows of the

corn and the woodland. The least spectacular of landscapes, but Rexford found it curiously satisfying even to a stranger. He suspected that even if one lived here the satisfaction would endure.

"You'll miss it," he said, still reluctant to begin saying the things that both of them had left unspoken during the silent ride in the interurban car, the silent climb up the hill.

"I suppose so. But don't you miss New York?"

"Any place can be missed, if you like it," he conceded with a laugh, turning to glance about the farm that lay on the rolling hilltop behind them. It looked neglected; except for a crop of alfalfa in a field beyond the pasture and some inadequate corn off beside the distant road, it was hardly cultivated at all. The house lay back, in a slight depression; a well-built house of limestone, unusual on a farm in that country, with a big but shabby barn beyond it. Beyond the wire fence that marked the inner boundary of the pasture a few forlorn haystacks thrust up their gray heads.

"I wonder if the man who lives here spends his time looking at the view. If he doesn't he's a swine who doesn't deserve the pearls."

"I don't imagine he wastes much time on it," Ruth laughed. "I don't know him, but I've seen him; he doesn't look like an enthusiast for scenery. His name's Raney."

"Raney? Oh, yes. I remember. Well, he doesn't spend much of his time taking care of the place—that's plain. I'm only an amateur farmer but even I can see that that corn's a disgrace. And there's no excuse for it—it grows a foot higher over there on

the other side of the turnpike. Look at that apple orchard, too. I'll bet this is a great country for apples, but that looks like—like the tail end of bad luck."

"You're getting to be a real Hoosier, aren't you? You use our language and seem to know all about our crops."

"I don't know much," he admitted, "but I try to learn. Which can't be said of all farmers. If I owned this place I'd be able to do something with it —and still have time to look at the view."

Ruth took off her hat and sat down on the grass.

"I need a rest, after the climb," she said. "And the storm is still a long way off."

He sank down beside her, wondering how to start what he had to say.

"Ruth——" he began.

"I wish you could see the house," she interrupted nervously. "It's really a dear. Not modern, of course, but well built. And it has—or used to have —some really good furniture."

"Mr. Raney has some taste, then? He didn't look like it."

"Oh, Raney's only a tenant. The farm belongs to Mr. Pence. The Millers came from Connecticut, ages ago, and brought their old furniture with them. They used to be one of the big families around here. But they died out, and those that were left went away, and finally there was nobody left but somebody's nephew in Philadelphia who wouldn't even pay off the mortgage, so Mr. Pence had to take it. I don't imagine it brings him in much money the way Raney runs it."

"Then maybe Pence would sell it," Rexford mused. She laughed.

"Maybe. Are you thinking of buying?"

He looked at her, thoughtfully at first; then, as he kept on looking, he found it hard to think at all. She was staring out across the valley, rather abstracted, the wind stirring her bobbed hair.

"I'd like to buy it," he said explosively, "if—— Ruth!"

She turned and looked at him and he realized that there was a good deal he wouldn't need to say.

"I suppose," he went on diffidently, "you wonder what I'd buy it on. But my grandfather left me twenty-five thousand dollars on condition that I support myself for a year by manual labor. In about five weeks I can collect that—and I've discovered I like work. I'd like to buy this farm, and work it, and live on it—if you'd live with me."

"Why did you tell me that?" she asked harshly. "About the money, I mean. Because if I could have gone on thinking we were both broke I could have thought how nice it would be. But now——"

"What's the matter?"

"We're worse than broke, father and I. Mortgages. Fifteen or twenty thousand, I suppose. They're going to begin coming due in the fall and Mr. Pence holds them."

"Fifteen or twenty from twenty-five leaves enough to start on."

"Do you think I'd let you start by paying my father's debts?"

"I hope you wouldn't be crazy enough to refuse to let me—let us—start at all on account of your

father's debts. Look here, Ruth. You and I have both tumbled from the heights, more or less—tumbled from the heights and hit bottom. All right—we've lost our illusions. Oh, don't try to fool me—you have too. I know you well enough for that. You do hard work with your hands and I do hard work with my hands and neither of us is afraid of it. I fought a man for you to-day, on account of you—yes, and you hit him on account of me. No use pretending. I didn't know I was in love with you till he hurt you, but I knew it then and I know it now. Do you mean to say you'd be willing to work for me and fight for me, and let me work for you and fight for you, and still you wouldn't let me pay your debts?"

"They're not my debts," said Ruth bitterly. "Besides, I couldn't leave father. He'll be all broken up when he has to leave the old place. I'll have to stay with him."

"But you can stay with him," he protested. "If you're going to have to give up the house anyway we could buy the farm and all live up here. But he wouldn't have to leave it. I could pay off the mortgages and he could go on living there, and we could——"

"Father wouldn't live on your money."

"But—Ruth, there's no use dodging this. If you'd married Herb your father would have had to live on Herb's money."

"That would have been different."

"How?"

"Well, it would have been—Herb would have had so much more—oh—what's your name? Nick? Oh,

Nick, I suppose I'm perfectly rotten. I'd never thought this out, you see. I suppose I thought it would be all right to live on Herb's money because he didn't need it. But you'll need all of yours. I won't let you start with a couple of millstones around your neck."

"You're not a millstone. Neither is your father," he lied gallantly.

"Yes, we are. Our troubles are right ahead of us and we've got to go through them. You can't help."

"Yes, I can help," he declared fiercely. "You're —— You poor sweetheart, you've had to stand by yourself all your life, haven't you? Nobody to lean on. Nobody to help you. You wanted to fight Herb yourself when there was a pretty fair amateur boxer right there beside you itching to help out. You're like that. But it isn't right. I'll go crazy if you won't let me help you. You must."

"The money isn't all, you know." Her voice was dull; she looked away. "It's being shown up as a failure before everybody that fath—that we mind. The Hollises used to be quite a family in Hollisburg, you know, and now we've got to hit bottom. Hit it hard. And it's too bad you happened to meet us and—and get interested in me, because you'll just have to go away and let us take what's coming."

"But you said you might go to New York——"

"That's all off," said Ruth abruptly. "It can't be done."

He could guess why it couldn't be done. Oliver Perry Morton Hollis would neither lift a hand to save himself nor let anybody else lift a hand to save

him. He would go under, and drag Ruth under with him, so that the honor of the Hollises should never be tarnished by work. Nick Rexford would have liked to take the old gentleman up the river and push him off the dam. Millstone was right. Yet, there must be some way out.

"Then what——"

"Oh, don't you see?" she pleaded. "If I had debts you could pay them or do anything you liked. But he'd never hear of it, and the time's coming pretty soon when everybody else will be against him. I've got to stand by."

"Then you might as well let me fall in line alongside."

She rose listlessly.

"We'll be caught in the rain if we don't hurry. You see, you don't know father. He'll make it as hard as he can for himself because he's stubborn and proud——"

"He hasn't any right to make it hard for you," he began, but her set face warned him that this was not a permissible line of argument.

"I can't quit," she said. "I won't quit."

They crossed the pasture and he held apart two strands of the barbed-wire fence while she slipped through. Between the haystacks they walked glum and silent till he said:

"But I can't quit either. How do you suppose I'll feel when you're going through all this and I can't help you?"

"I know. That's the worst of it—the very worst."

"Then you do love me?" he asked, rather humbly. Her dark blue eyes were moist.

"Love you? I suppose you think I don't, maybe, because I put father first. Or maybe you think I don't love you because I let Herb call you a sewer rat and didn't hit him till he insulted father. But I do. We've known each other just five days, but I do. . . .

"I knew I loved you Sunday, when we were swimming. I'd gone out to swim by myself because I'm most contented when I'm swimming alone, in the sun, away from all my worries. And you came along that day and I was more contented still, because you were with me. Then I knew, and I know a dozen other ways now.

"Nick, do you know that you're the only person that ever made me happy? That I really like to be with? I've always kept to myself. I've had to. . . . Oh, Herb! That was a fit of insanity. I ought to have known better. . . . People will tell you that I'm bad-tempered and proud and glum and unsociable, and I'm probably all that and more. But I was always afraid to let myself go. I couldn't. I knew what was coming. I was tied up with somebody—with something that was bound to collapse some day. I couldn't talk about it to other girls; I couldn't let any man in for it. I had to go my own way all alone.

"And now, within a week, I've found out that it makes me happy just to be with you—to walk with you and swim with you, talk to you, listen to you, or just sit and look at you. Perfectly happy. You've done me more good in five days than all the other people I know have done me all my life. You've made me happy. And I love you so much that I'm going to treat you decently. I'm not going to pay

you back by making you work yourself to death to support us Hollises. We bury our own dead."

He knew her reasoning was all wrong but there was an iron firmness about her that seemed unassailable. He moved toward her, held out his arms; but she threw up her hands and backed away.

"No, no. Please don't. I don't think I could stand it."

"What if we do have to work—yes, work ourselves to death?" he demanded. "We'd probably have to anyway; we might as well get some fun out of it instead of just running around in circles. You said you wanted your own particular job——"

"My own particular job is to stick to the ship."

"But—let the mortgages go and persuade your father to live with us. We could make a living—a good living—out of this very farm. This fellow Raney can't, perhaps, but he's no farmer and he doesn't work. Why, look at this haystack. A six-year-old boy could put up a better one. Look at this."

He walked over to the nearest stack, awkwardly built, unstable, and contemptuously thrust his hand into a crevice in the thatched wall.

"Why, if I gave it a shove," he said, laughing nervously, "the thing would tumble down. If I——"

He stopped, thrust his arm in farther.

"Anybody in sight?" he asked in a changed tone.

"Nobody. Why?"

A heave, a twist—and a layer of hay slid off to the ground. Where it had been there stood out a black curved thing—the body of an automobile.

"No wonder Raney isn't much of a farmer," said Rexford softly. "He doesn't need to be."

Ruth hardly understood even yet.

"What a queer place to hide his car!"

"Not queer at all," he said thoughtfully. "Not at all. You see, his car—or rather the car I saw him driving last night—is a Dodge. This is a Buick."

"Oh!" said Ruth, comprehending at last. "We've found something, haven't we?"

"We certainly have."

Then a rumble of thunder, nearer now, drowned his voice. In their late preoccupation they hadn't noticed that the clouds had spread across the sky; it was almost dusk. Ruth looked at her cheap wrist watch.

"Why, it's nearly half past seven. We'll have to hurry or we'll be caught in the storm."

They set off rapidly down the hill—more gently sloping here, but still steep enough. Their discovery had been welcome, in a way, to both; it gave them something else to think about, the relief of an external interest to release the gathering tension. Yet neither of them could think about it very long, or very hard. What had happened to them kept coming back, overriding the explanation of the automobile thefts in the Willow River valley. She had seemed hard, unalterable, rigidly loyal to her stern code; yet he was only twenty-three and the resilience of his age refused to admit that this hard decision could be final. . . . Ruth could see no way out, no escape from the predestined fate of the Hollises. She couldn't run away; whatever her father decided

she must stand by him. But she was only twenty-one and she simply couldn't believe that everything was going to be spoiled.

And when their parallel trains of thought had come to this point she stumbled, in the gathering darkness; he reached out, caught her hand, jerked her up—and into his arms. He kissed her as hard and as suddenly as Herb had kissed her on Saturday night, and she liked it. She clung to him and kissed him back till another peal of thunder banged above them.

"Come," she cried, releasing herself but clinging still to his hand. "No use getting rained on."

"But, Ruth! Don't you—— Can't you——"

"We can argue after we get home. And I'm starved, aren't you? Come on up to the house and we'll have a cold supper."

"We ought to——"

"Tell Mr. Flint about what we've found?"

Rexford grinned.

"Mr. Flint and I aren't on speaking terms. No, I've found that the best thing to do with trouble is to tell it to Sellers."

XXI.

Storm.

BLACK sodden clouds hung low in the windless, sultry evening; the lightning played around the horizon, the steady murmur of distant thunder was punctuated at intervals by louder, nearer claps; but the rain held off. Rexford and Ruth came swinging into town, keeping step in a long rapid pace—their hearts thumping from their race with the storm, the discovery of the mystery of Raney's farm, their own new and marvelous emotion. Anybody who saw them coming down Main Street, as many people did, must have felt their tingling exaltation; it was exciting and delightful merely to look at them.

They peered into Dan Cullen's lunch counter, but Sellers wasn't there. Then down the side street; but the office was dark and when Rexford knocked loudly there was no answer.

"Probably gone to the movies," he suggested, "and I haven't a key."

"Then you'd better come up to the house and have supper. You can call him from there. Oh, I forgot—the telephone's out of order. But—do you have to find Sellers now?"

He smiled softly at her in the shadow.

"Sellers can wait." Then, his glance roving, he saw Rufe across the street, closing the gate into the

yard behind the garage. "Anyway," Rexford added, "I can leave a message for him."

He crossed the street and addressed the suspicious Rufe.

"If Mr. Sellers comes back, will you tell him I want to see him? I'm going—er—out, but I'll be back before very long."

That, he reflected, was probably untrue, on his first chance to spend an evening with Ruth; but Sellers would be up and waiting for him, anyway. And, as Rufe nodded, Rexford hurried back to join his girl.

Hurrying up the hill, breathless, they thought they had beaten the storm. But as they crossed the street to the Hollises' gate the first big drops came down. Through the circle of light beneath the street-corner arc lamp, into the dimness of the long flight of steps between the shadowing sycamores—and the rain came down in a torrent. They ran up the steps, stumbling, laughing, always faster.

Halfway up was a sort of landing—a platform paved with flagstones, twenty feet square, ornamented with a broken bench and a lamp which in the great days of the Hollises had held a gaslight. The light had gone out long ago, but the landing still offered a moment's interruption in that long steady climb. As Ruth reached it she almost fell.

"Oh—Nick! Not so fast."

Rexford picked her up and started on up the steps. They were endless and Ruth wasn't as light as she looked; but he didn't care. She was clinging to him, her arms around his neck; and her lips were pressed against his till they neared the top and came

within the light from the parlor window. Then he set her down hastily, and they ran up, dripping, on the porch, to bring the old Colonel to the door, coatless and slippered.

"God bless me, Ruth, you're wet through. I wondered where you were. Good evening, Mr. Rexford. Delighted to welcome you beneath my roof again."

"We were out at the club," said Ruth. "And we haven't had anything to eat. Have you?"

"I had something downtown," said the Colonel. "My, my! Ruth, go up and put on some dry clothes. Mr. Rexford, if you'll come with me I can at least give you a pair of dry slippers and a dressing-gown."

Rufe had gone back to the garage office. There, as the rain descended, he pulled down the window shade and sat gloomily by the desk. Rexford again! Why should he have to send word to Sellers that he wanted to see him? Queer way for a chauffeur-office boy to talk to his boss. Rufe wondered what Blades would think of this.

But Blades wasn't there. Blades, of course, was dining with the Pences. The invitations would be out next week. Honeymoon in Canada. Settle down and go straight; become business men of Hollisburg. That was Blades's way.

"No," said Rufe grimly. "He can fix it his way, but maybe I can fix things my way, too. I know how to take care of myself. And there was one thing we both agreed ought to be done before he got off on this new slant."

Lifting a corner of the shade he peered out into

Main Street. The stores opposite could hardly be seen through the sheets of falling rain. Nobody would be out to-night. A man could go where he pleased. In the shadows—shadows of tall sycamores, in a yard on the hillside far above the street lamps, far below the lights of the house——

Rufe went to a locker in the corner of the room, opened it and took out a raincoat. He threw it loosely over his shoulders as he stooped down; even a man who might come in suddenly couldn't see into the locker as Rufe reached in cautiously, pressed here and there. The false back wall swung open, disclosing a compartment that even Blades had never seen.

Rufe took out, with extreme care, a pair of rubber gloves which he thrust into a pocket; then a two-foot length of gas pipe which he slipped down a trousers leg. Then he pushed the false wall back into place, closed the locker and slipped out. Dodging behind the cars in the garage, he escaped the notice of the sleepy negroes. Back to the alley fence, to remove a loose board, and replace it carefully after he had slipped through. Then, muffled in his raincoat, a dark cap well down over his eyes, he set out toward the Elm Street hill.

Coming back from the club a couple of hours earlier, Herb Pence had gone to his private room in the deserted bank. His body ached from the blows he had taken in the fight; his face smarted. A temper naturally bad, made worse by this fierce inconclusive battle, hadn't been improved at all by an argument with the Reverend Mr. Rigdon on the morality

and etiquette of promiscuous fighting. Herb had come back to town in black ferocity. He wouldn't go home; he didn't want to see his father or George Blades; still less any of the young men about town who would presently hear of his fight at the club. There was only one consolation for him; and when he had locked his door behind him and pulled down the shades he found it in a drawer of his desk—a bottle of real prewar Bourbon.

He drank steadily, quick gulps unworthy of this noble drink that ought to have been sipped drop by drop; big gulps chased down by occasional tumblers from the water cooler. And as he drank his black bitterness grew. Ruth and Rexford and Rigdon—he'd get even with all three. Ruth first——

Ruth first? Why not Rexford first? He had a suspicion, which gradually became a conviction, that damage done to Rexford would be the worst possible blow at Ruth. One idea after another passed through his muddling head till at last an unusually heavy clap of thunder shook him into half sobriety. He looked at the bottle. Almost all gone. Didn't know he could hold that much and still keep his head. Better man than he'd thought. Better man than she'd thought. Better man than anybody'd thought.

He reached into his pocket for a cigarette. None there. Well, he could get some at Meservy's pool room. Unsteadily he made his way up the street to face Meservy across the counter.

"Hear you're goin' to challenge Dempsey," said Meservy jovially. "Where's your sparrin' partner?"

"You go to hell," Herb responded with dignity,

and lurched out on to the sidewalk. And there he saw Ruth and Rexford walking down the opposite side of the street, swinging along lightly, their faces glowing, their hearts apparently as light as their feet. He glowered at them as they turned off down the side street, wondering, thinking fearful things. He was going home with her. Herb had gone home with her till Saturday night—home to sit and talk with that old ass the Colonel, to wriggle under Ruth's saturnine glances and infrequent sardonic remarks, to argue with her for the privilege of a cold caress before he went home.

She didn't look cold to-night.

Herb decided he'd go up to the house, confront them, have—have a show-down, he decided vaguely. He could have licked Rexford this afternoon if the preacher hadn't stopped them. Could he, now? It had been a tougher fight than he expected. The man probably was a city thug, maybe a gunman. Gunman —best to take no chances.

Herb went back to the bank and finished the bottle; then, with lights off, finding his way about this familiar room by the glow of the street lamps gleaming through the windows and the dim bulb always lit in front of the vault, he edged toward the cashier's window. What he wanted was on a little shelf just below the counter, and it was always loaded. Jim Harby had never been held up, but he would never be caught napping. Herb slipped the gun into his hip pocket.

"Now I got him," he murmured thickly, lowering at the shadows in the dim-lit room. "Damn sewer

rat. New York gunman. Show him I can use a gun too. Show her. I'll get it out of her, who he is and why she runs with him. I'll make her talk."

He turned up his coat collar and strode out into the rain.

In the tall bay-windowed dining-room of the Hollis mansion Ruth and Rexford were eating supper—cold ham, cold biscuit, chicken salad, three kinds of jelly, chocolate layer cake and hot coffee. The Colonel had sat with them for a little while and then withdrawn to the library. He was settling down to more energetic labor on his history; he didn't propose to let himself be diverted by more extraneous misfortunes.

Rexford was glad to see him go. He deserved a sort of respect as Ruth's father, of course, and, other things apart, he was undeniably a fine old gentleman. But just as undeniably he was a millstone. A millstone about Ruth's neck, dragging her down into the uttermost depths of the bottomless pit; a millstone so heavy that she wouldn't let Rexford ease the load. A fine old gentleman, but he wouldn't lift a finger to save himself or let anybody else lift a finger to save Ruth. One hundred per cent worthless, Rexford mused sorrowfully. He was glad they were left alone.

He was wrapped in a purple silk dressing-gown of the Colonel's, with holes worn clear through it in places and the tasseled silk cord that once had belted it replaced by a length of clothesline; he wore a pair of the Colonel's slippers that were three sizes

too big. But he didn't care. For he sat at the head of the table, and Ruth sat opposite, in a trim little white waist and skirt, pouring his coffee.

"If you married me——" he began presently.

"Now, Nick!"

"Well, if you did," he persisted, "it would probably be a good thing that we didn't have much money. Because if we were rich we'd have to keep up appearances by hiring the late czar's cook and he wouldn't be anywhere near so good as you."

"I wouldn't——" she began, then stopped. "Did you hear that?"

"I hear a good deal," said Rexford. "Rain and thunder, mostly. What did you hear?"

"It sounded like a knock at the door," she said, puzzled. "Whoever, on a night like this—— There! It is a knock at the door!"

She rose hurriedly, but the Colonel called back from the front hall: "Never mind, Ruth. I'll go."

The two in the dining-room could hear only indistinct voices and it was just as well that they did. For the Colonel opened the door on Herb Pence, water dripping in sheets from his coat and his shapeless Panama, his face flushed and his eyes glassy.

"I want to see Ruth," he muttered.

"Why, Herb!" The Colonel was convinced that something awful had happened—perhaps to Leila, perhaps to St. Elmo Pence. And the telephone was still out of order. Then he caught a faint odor. He was wrong. Something awful had happened to Herb.

Awful? Well—the Colonel regretted that the gifts of Providence should be so misused; Herb undeniably was drunk. Still, a connoisseur of aromas

couldn't help respecting the stuff that had made him drunk. And the Colonel, in the first flush of eagerness to rescue a voyager through the storm, had brought him in.

"Why do you want to see Ruth?" he demanded sternly.

"I—I got my reasons. Got to see her." Swaying back and forth, Herb's hand wandered back toward his hip pocket, then away. So, thought the Colonel, he has his flask on him.

"You're not fit to speak to a lady in your present condition," he said sternly. "I won't turn you back into the storm; but come into the library."

"Is he here?"

"Who?"

"This fellow that calls himself Rexford."

"It doesn't concern you who is my guest in my house."

"Well, if you want to know about this—call Ruth. I got to see Ruth. You tell her, now. After what happened this afternoon I got to see her. You tell her and she'll come runnin' if she knows I'm here. Tell her I've got something to say to her."

The Colonel looked him up and down with contempt. Bounder! But these were strange times and Herb had referred to something that had happened this afternoon, something unknown to the Colonel.

"Wait here," he said sharply. He strode down to the dining-room.

"Ruth, Herb Pence is here. He—he's rather in his cups, I fear. He says he wants to see you and he seems so sure you want to see him that I thought perhaps there——"

"Isn't that like Herb?" said Ruth contemptuously. "I've been telling him ever since Saturday night I don't want to see him, but he can't get it through his head. Well, I'll make him understand this time."

She rose, but the Colonel waved her back.

"Never mind, daughter. I'll attend to him."

There was a firmness, an authority, in his manner that Ruth hadn't seen for years, that Rexford had never seen. It might have come, perhaps, from the fact that the famous history of Hollis County had just reached the heroic chapter dealing with General George Washington Hollis and his brigade at the battle of Buena Vista. That had stirred thoughts, memories, atavistic instincts. Whatever its source, the Colonel's manner was surprisingly convincing. Ruth sank down uncertainly in her chair as the Colonel closed the door behind him.

"Herb must be pickled to come out in weather like this," she said in perplexity. "I do hope he won't say anything mean to father."

The Colonel went back, to confront the swaying youth in the front hall.

"She won't see you, and quite properly." Herb still swayed silently. "I say she won't see you. Good night, Mr. Pence."

Herb's hand slipped back toward his hip pocket; the Colonel's face turned red.

"I've got something here," said Herb, fumbling desperately at his pocket, "something that will make her talk. Yes, sir. I'll make her talk."

"Get out!" the Colonel roared. "Do you think my daughter is one of your drunken modern hussies?

Great God! The idea of wasting good liquor on whelps like you! Something that will make her talk—— Take your hand away from that pocket!"

Herb hesitated, stepped back, and took his hand away.

"Get out! Go home and sleep it off. Never dare let me see your impudent face here again. Something that will make her talk! Great God! Bounder! Whippersnapper! Get out!"

His gray hair standing out around his pink face, he towered over Herb furiously; and after a last struggle between a dying and defeated determination and the whisky-dulled nerves that wouldn't respond, Herb collapsed with a groaning sigh and stumbled out through the door that the Colonel had flung open. The Colonel stood watching in the open doorway till Herb was halfway down to the landing; then, satisfied that he was really going home, he shut the door.

It was cold and wet waiting for the man who lurked in the shadow of a sycamore beside the broken bench on the landing, rain pouring down the back of his neck and running water sloshing in his shoes. But Rufe had waited longer and on worse nights for things he wanted. The rubber gloves, skin tight, were on his hands; the gas pipe was grasped firmly under the cloaking raincoat. And he hadn't been there more than five minutes when the door far above him opened and a man came out. This was unexpected luck. Rufe had been prepared to wait an hour or two, but clearly Rexford had only taken the girl home and was now coming away. Colonel Hollis's

figure was dimly outlined in the lighted doorway, evidently watching in hospitable farewell as his guest withdrew; and Rufe began to be seriously alarmed. But the door closed, the light vanished, and only an infrequent flash of lightning showed the watcher the figure of the young man stumbling down the steps.

This was going to be easy. Rufe drew out his gas pipe, refastened his raincoat and shrank back behind the sycamore. Nearer and nearer, plumping down recklessly three steps at a time, his victim came out on the forgotten landing; stumbled, caught himself and looked about uncertainly just as Rufe stepped out and swung his gas pipe.

As his arm went up another flash of lightning rippled across the sky and Rufe looked into the bewildered fat face of Herb Pence. It was too late to withdraw, but instinctively he did what his subconsciousness had to do, even though his thought, a second later, realized that it was a mistake. He pulled his punch; the blow fell with half the force it had started with, and Herb, sensing trouble, had just had time to fling up a warding arm. Nevertheless, he fell headlong as the gas pipe struck him; fell and lay motionless. And Rufe, pausing a moment to make sure he was senseless, threw the gas pipe as far as he could on the terraced yard and slipped away through the rain, cursing silently.

XXII.

Characteristic Behavior of St. Elmo Pence.

THE Colonel had come back to the dining-room where Ruth and Rexford had tried vainly to catch the words spoken by those two angry voices beyond the closed doors.

"He's gone," he announced. "I had to speak rather plainly to him, I'm afraid. Bah! What can you expect? St. Elmo Pence is a man of no breeding; Mrs. Pence was a very estimable and worthy woman, but—no figs from thistles, no figs from thistles."

He broke off, feeling that these municipal quarrels shouldn't be ventilated before a stranger to the town; but Ruth spoke up:

"Well, Herb's a thistle. A prickly one. I hate him." Within a day or so, she knew, her father would hear of what had happened at the club, so she had better get her story in first. "We had a fight out at the club this afternoon."

The Colonel lit a stogy before he answered.

"What language you young people use! Any one would suppose——"

"Oh, this was a real fight," Ruth admitted. "I hit him and he tried to break my arm, and Nick—Mr. Rexford—pulled him off and was beating him to pieces——"

"Bless my soul!"

The Colonel's exclamation, and the Colonel's face, told little of the emotions that were running through him. His daughter had struck a man; she had engaged in a low brawl; and the casual acquaintance who had quite properly gone to her assistance was already known to her as Nick. "Bless my soul" seemed the least that might be said.

"So you beat him to pieces?" he inquired genially.

"Not quite," Rexford conceded. "To tell the truth, sir, it was about even. I think I'd have beaten him and I suppose he thinks he'd have beaten me, but we were separated."

"Mr. Rigdon," Ruth explained. "He came in and pushed them apart just as Nick was getting the better of him."

"That sounds like Rigdon," the Colonel observed. "He's one of these angels who rush in where ordinary fools would have sense enough not to tread. But how did you come to—er—strike Herb?"

"Something he said," Ruth explained obscurely. "I'll never speak to him again. Honestly. I hate him."

"Bless my soul!" said the Colonel again, and retired behind the smoke of his stogy. His daughter was showing a fierceness he had never dreamed was in her; she was, Heaven help him, almost vulgarly emotional. His eyes wandered again, rather anxiously, to the young man she insisted on calling Nick. Nick's manners were good, but the Colonel wished they knew a little more about him.

"Well, well!" he said with a great clearing of the throat. "I suppose the times change and the world

goes round. A great many things seem to be settled by fighting nowadays that used to be argued out or ignored. I—I trust you won't find it necessary to strike him again."

"I'll keep away from him," Ruth promised. "That's the best way to keep from hitting him. And you will too, Nick—won't you?"

The Colonel loosened his collar. She was addressing this unidentified Nick in a tone of quiet, intimate command, giving him orders as if she were certain they would be obeyed.

"I'll keep out of his way if I can," Rexford promised. "Of course if he attacks me I'll have to defend myself. But I'll try to be good."

The rain had almost stopped. There was a steady drip from the eaves, a metallic tinkle of water pouring through tin gutters, but the downpour had given way to a fitful retreating drizzle. Rexford looked out through the tall bay windows.

"I'd better be getting back to the office," he announced. "I'm due for a little talk with my boss to-night."

Ruth's eyebrows went up in a question as she nodded toward her father; Rexford, behind the Colonel's back, shook his head. No use spreading the news of their find on the farm just yet.

They had other news, to be sure, news far more important; but it seemed that that would never be communicated to the Colonel. Yet as Rexford went upstairs and changed the tattered dressing-gown and the old slippers for his damp coat and his stiff, soaked shoes, he couldn't help an unreasoning conviction that somehow things would come out right.

If there were any justice in the universe Ruth Hollis mustn't be sacrificed to a—a millstone.

Both Hollises accompanied him to the door and watched him well on his way down the long flight of uneven steps, over which little sheets of running water fell in tiny cascades. The Colonel looked at his watch.

"Half past nine. He leaves early, for a young man of this generation."

"He had some work to do," Ruth explained demurely. "But he'll come again. I'd forgotten that you wanted to draw him out on sociology."

The Colonel cast a pained glance at his daughter. She was not only emotional but sophisticated. She was, in fact, a grown woman, and a total stranger. He wished he had given some thought to this inevitable development before it was complete, and found out something about her. He might have taken her more into his confidence, explained some of the more profound implications of his history of Hollis County. But it was too late now. From now on, he mused as he returned to the library and settled down to his writing, they would probably have this Nick around the house a good deal; and it seemed very doubtful if there would be much opportunity to draw him out on sociology. Somehow the implicit engagement to Herb Pence had never given Ruth this air of sure maturity, nor anything like these sudden explosions of deep-rooted feeling. A grown woman. He ought to know more about her; ought to have taken better care of her. But he could do nothing for her now.

Ruth was removing the supper dishes; the Colonel

set his pen to paper, paused to recover his train of thought—and heard a tramping on the porch and a knock at the door. He got up promptly and angrily; if this were Herb again, he'd throw him out.

And it was Herb again, but a limp, senseless Herb, thrown like a sack over Rexford's shoulder.

"What in the world——" the Colonel gasped. "Hurt, is he? Badly hurt?"

"Afraid so," Rexford panted. "I stumbled over him—down here. On the landing."

"Bring him into the library. Ruth!"

Rexford laid his dripping, muddy burden down on a wicker couch and straightened up to face the two Hollises.

"I might have known it," the Colonel was muttering. "I might have known it. He was too drunk to get down those steps in the dark and the rain. He must have stumbled."

"He didn't stumble," said Rexford, lifting Herb's head. The back of it was covered with blood.

"Somebody hit him from behind," said Rexford grimly, "and hit him hard."

The Colonel straightened up.

"Well, we needn't lose time. Our telephone is out of order, Mr. Rexford. Will you go down to the Crawfords'—that house across the street, on the right—and telephone to Mr. Pence and Doctor Peebles? I think that will be enough. Pence will make the arrangements to move him, if he can be moved. Ruth, go get a basin of warm water and some towels."

Rexford was running down the steps; Ruth had gone to the kitchen. The Colonel regarded Herb

with something like pity. The boy smelled loudly of liquor, but they might as well remove evidence that would upset St. Elmo Pence if it met his eye at the outset. Cautiously the Colonel reached around to the hip pocket to extract and hide the flask; and his fingers touched a cold metallic barrel, a rough hard-rubber pistol butt.

"I'm damned," he grunted. "When these young people say fight, they seem to mean fight."

When Rexford came back Herb had been cleaned up and looked considerably less disastrous; but the wound on his head seemed to be serious and he was still unconscious. But hardly had they begun to wonder what they could do by way of first aid when a horn sounded from the winding driveway, followed by the furious whirring of a motor. St. Elmo Pence had broken all records across town and up the hill. With him was Leila, and with Leila, George Blades; and there was still another man in their party—Frank Flint, formidable in blue uniform and nickeled star, whom Pence had picked up on Main Street and brought to the scene of what evidently was a crime.

But all these fell into the background as Pence strode into the library.

"How is he, Hollis?" Then without waiting for an answer he dropped beside the cot and peered at the bandaged wound. He had come in with such a rush that one might have supposed he was going to dress the wound himself, diagnose the case, do everything that the doctor might have done and do it better; but he didn't. He sat back helplessly on his heels, almost as if he were afraid to touch his son. He shivered.

Leila tiptoed in behind him, trembling, clinging to Blades' arm. They made as good a picture of the bereaved family at the deathbed as could have been desired; their gloom was pouring in floods over the others in the room when with a flash of headlights and a honking Doctor Peebles' car arrived.

He brushed the Pences out of the way and examined the injured man intently, calling now for this and that implement of first aid that Ruth hurried to bring.

"Well?" Pence whispered.

"There's no fracture. Can't tell how serious the shock may be, of course; but nothing is smashed."

"Then he'll live?"

"Of course. He may be laid up for three days or three weeks, but he'll live."

"Ah!" St. Elmo Pence straightened up, shook himself, and recovered his imperial bearing. "Then the question is to find the man who did it." His eyes blazed at Rexford. "You found him, eh? Then tell the chief of police about it."

Telling Flint wasn't so easy, for he kept interrupting. What else, whom else, had Rexford seen on the landing? Nobody? A sneering grin. How was Herb lying? Was he conscious? What had Rexford been doing here?

"He'd been here for supper," Ruth interposed with quiet scorn. Very well; what had Herb been doing here?

"He said he came to see my daughter," said the Colonel. "She didn't want to see him, so he left."

"He left, eh? And then Rexford left? Now, Rexford," Flint growled, "you had a fight with Mr.

Herb this afternoon, didn't you? At the club? Over this girl."

"Over his manners," Rexford amended.

"No impudence, now! And you brought her home; and he came to see her; and she wouldn't see him; and—you was separated before you had a chance to fight it out this afternoon, wasn't you? And each of you said he'd get the other."

"This is preposterous," Colonel Hollis interrupted.

"What do you know about this fellow?" Flint demanded.

"He is my—er—friend; he has been my guest——"

"Yes, he come up to cut your grass last week, didn't he? That's the first you ever seen him. What do you know about him? Who is he? Where's he from?"

"Hadn't you better ask me that?" said Rexford. "I know more about it than Colonel Hollis."

"Shut up till I speak to you. What do you know about him, Colonel?"

"I know he's a gentleman. That alone is enough to make him remarkable in this town."

"Gentleman!" St. Elmo Pence set the example of scornful laughter, in which his satellites joined. "Well, doctor, can we take the boy home? I can improvise a pretty fair couch of cushions in that car of mine."

"I think so," said the doctor. "Better get a nurse for him—I think Miss Hubbard is free this week. I don't need to tell you to be careful."

"You certainly don't. Leila, go out and tell Berry to come in and help us carry him." Then, as the colored chauffeur appeared in the doorway: "Doctor, I suppose you won't mind taking Flint downtown, will you?"

Flint looked inquiringly at the great man.

"Looks like a case to me, Mr. Pence."

"What? Oh, by all means. Arrest him, certainly. We'll hold him while we investigate, anyhow."

"What's this?" said the Colonel. "Arrest this boy? What for?"

"For trying to kill Herb," said Pence viciously. "For hitting him on the back of the head, after he couldn't beat him from in front this afternoon."

"If you think I could do a man that much damage with my fist," said Rexford, bowing gracefully, "why, Mr. Pence, you flatter me."

"We'll find what you did it with," said Pence coldly. "I suppose you'll be telling me Herb hit himself or fell on his face and cut the back of his head open."

"Preposterous!" said the Colonel.

"Who else was in your yard to-night? Who else had a grudge against Herb? Who else, since Pence cleaned out the tramps, isn't known in this town? We let one tramp stay; and that was one too many."

Flint laid his hand on Rexford's shoulder.

"Come along," he ordered. "See if Clay Sellers can get you out of this."

"Now, Berry," Pence ordered, "you and George take Herb. Leila, bring his hat. Ruth, you'll be

wanted down in justice's court to-morrow, probably, to give evidence about that affair at the club. And I want you to understand——"

"Pence," said the Colonel heavily, "we all sympathize with you; we'll do what we can to help find out who did this; but—you can't give orders in my house."

"Your house?" Pence repeated, his undershot jaw thrusting still farther out. "Why, Hollis, you haven't got enough of an equity in this house to buy a postage stamp. I give orders where I damn please."

He shepherded them all out, Flint clutching Rexford's shoulder and shoving him with needless vigor. The door slammed; the cars throbbed, hummed and rolled away; through the returning silence they heard the patter of the returning rain.

Ruth was standing silent in the corner, sullen fire blazing in her eyes. With a jerky motion she started up and went out into the hall. The Colonel's head dropped. Pence had beaten him; Pence had had his way. Money, political power, the prestige of success, the confidence of mastery—he would and could give orders where he pleased.

Ruth came back in her Panama and a raincoat.

"Where are you going?" her father asked.

"Down to tell Clay Sellers about this."

"You—we—don't you think Rexford can look after that?"

"I'm not so sure, with Flint giving him a third degree or something. Flint's been after him ever since he came to town. He'll jump at this chance."

"Daughter," said the Colonel, "I—Pence is a

headstrong, hard man; but—you don't suppose there could be anything——"

"You mean Nick did it? Nonsense!"

"When Herb came up here this evening he had a gun in his pocket. He was drunk and he may have meant to use it. Well, I got Herb out of the way. But if he waited for Rexford, if he set on him——"

"If that had happened," said Ruth, "Nick would have told us. And he'd never hit a man from behind. And he didn't have anything to hit him with, anyway."

"Hrrrmph!" said the Colonel. "Daughter, loyalty to friends is a splendid quality, but it sometimes gets us into deep water. I share your opinion of Herb, but—we don't know much about this Mr. Rexford. With no opportunity to observe his conduct or ascertain his antecedents——"

"Oh, don't talk about things like that," she said wearily. "I'm going down to get Sellers started."

"You, child? Why, it's raining and dark as pitch. If you feel that Sellers ought to be notified to-night, I'll go. It's my place."

"It's my place," said Ruth. "I love him."

The Colonel felt the room whirling about him.

"You love whom? Rexford?"

"Of course."

It didn't seem a matter of course to the Colonel.

"Then perhaps you know who he is, what——"

"Oh, father, I don't know any of those silly things. What do they matter anyway? I love him. Do you think I can sit still here while you're downtown looking for Sellers and maybe Flint is giving Nick a third degree? I've stood by you and played your

game, father, but this is my game. I've got to help Nick."

"If it is your game," said the Colonel with dignity, "obviously it is my game too. We'll both go."

He gave her an arm as they went down the slippery steps in the rain, but none the less he felt very weak and helpless. He had just been insulted, humiliated, abased in his own house. He had heard the incredible news that his daughter was in love with a man of whom he knew nothing save that he had come to town as a hobo—a man Ruth had known five days. A sudden age. Headstrong young people. What was the world coming to?

And he, Oliver Perry Morton Hollis, was on this decisive evening only the tail to his daughter's kite; could only sit by in dubious silence while she worked and planned in a cause that had suddenly become her supreme interest. He ought to help her; above all and especially if she had given her love to a mysterious and possibly disreputable stranger, a man of whom Hollisburg knew nothing except that he had arrived on foot and had just been arrested for assault with intent to kill, Oliver Perry Morton Hollis ought to throw all his authority to the support of his daughter.

But he had no authority. Pence's insolence had proved that. He was getting old, old and useless. He was only a millstone around his daughter's neck. If he had started in time he might have ruled Hollisburg as Pence ruled it; the keys of the city might have been his to give or withhold. If he had started in time, if he had worked—— But it was too late now.

Nevertheless the Colonel could take the lead when they found Clay Sellers reading in his office, looking up in amazement as the two Hollises came in, dripping, from the night. The Colonel explained briefly, and with proper reticences, what had happened. They felt sure that their guest, Mr. Rexford, was innocent; merely as a matter of justice they had taken up his cause; they felt sure Sellers would want to protect him against what looked like persecution on the part of the Pences.

"It certainly does," said Sellers, with an expression as nearly angry as the Colonel had ever seen on his face. "Wonder if Elmo Pence thought of all that himself? Who came up with him? Ah! Blades, eh? Now I wonder—— Well, Colonel, we'll do what we can. I'll go around and talk to Flint."

"Wait!" said Ruth. "There's something else. If I don't tell you now, I'll forget it. Nick and I walked home this afternoon. I took him up to see the view from the old Miller place; and we saw——"

Sellers listened with an inscrutable mask of calm, puffing at his corncob pipe while the Colonel's eyes grew bigger and bigger. But when Ruth had finished Sellers slapped his thigh and burst into laughter.

"You certainly made a find," he chuckled. "You certainly did. Well, Ruth, I don't know whether that little discovery will help any in this other matter, but it's so blamed important the other matter can wait. I'll just call up Flint and let him know I'm on the job, so that he won't get too fresh. I kind of think Flint's a little bit afraid of me, what I know about how he spends his time on his trips to Indianapolis. And then I'll ask you to say nothing

about this little affair of the haystack till I've passed it on to more properly interested parties. No, Ruth, don't you worry. I'll look after Rexford just as well as you would yourself. I'll call you up tomorrow and let you know how things are going; but just now I've got to phone Flint and then get on to other matters."

Five minutes later the Hollises had gone, having stayed to hear Flint called up at the jail and shaken by some suave insinuations as to what Sellers could tell, if he felt like it. And when the Hollises had vanished into the darkness Sellers took up the phone again and called the Pershing House.

"Room 24, please. Hello, Mr. Crisler. Say, come right over. No, you don't need to be afraid to be seen with me now. We've got 'em."

XXIII.

Unprecedented Activity of Mr. Sellers.

NEVERTHELESS, they hadn't got them—not yet; and it was lucky for Clay Sellers and B. F. Crisler that Hollisburg was too much excited next morning to pay attention to their unusual activity.

That Herb Pence had been violently assaulted and that Nick Rexford was in jail charged with the crime was big news for Hollisburg. As the town talked it over on Thursday morning there wasn't much doubt about his guilt. The Pences had spread the first version of the story and as they told it there was no room for two opinions. It was notorious that Rexford and Herb had had an inconclusive fight at the club the day before; Herb had been heard threatening to get Rexford, so of course Rexford must have been equally determined to get Herb; and Rexford had been seen in the company of a girl whose recent and unexpected quarrel with Herb was still a matter of lively gossip. The editor of the *Evening Gazette,* after keeping his ears open up and down Main Street, went back to the office to write a sizzling story in which Rexford was referred to, without qualification, as "the criminal" who was likely to be saved from mob violence only by Chief Flint's

courageous insistence that the law must be allowed to take its course.

But shortly before noon Clay Sellers strolled into the *Gazette* office.

"Hear you're writin' quite a piece about this affair, Clayton," he observed. "Thought you might like to hear two sides. I'm Rexford's attorney, you know."

"It's in the story," said Clayton. "Flint tells me you were putting in your oar almost before he'd got him locked up."

"Knowin' Flint," said Sellers, "I thought I'd better be quick. But what I wanted to tell you, Clayton, was that you can quote me as sayin' that my client's innocent, and that evidence now in my possession—now in my possession, mind you—will prove that whenever he comes up in court for hearing."

"Oh, I can quote you as saying that, can I?"

"Yes, you can. And what's more, you blame well better quote me as sayin' that if you don't want a good stiff libel suit on your hands as soon as Rexford is let off. Which will be as soon as his case comes before a justice. He'll never be held for the grand jury. I just wanted to set you right, Clayton, not wishin' to see you lose your profits from the county printing in a lawsuit."

Clayton thought it over; Clay Sellers rarely talked like this unless he knew what he was talking about. So the story wasn't at all as sizzling as he had intended and Sellers' statement was given due prominence. The *Gazette* got out an extra at noon and by that time there was already evidence of a

division of sentiment. Some of this may have been due to the discreet propaganda that Sellers was conducting by word of mouth; some of it, doubtless, to the fact that Rexford, too, was a Phi Chi, and that it would be more flattering to the interest of the order to have him turn out innocent.

Then Tom Blakely, who had seen the fight at the club, had risked the wrath of the Pences by proclaiming that Herb had started it, and the preacher, Rigdon, gave testimony that after it had ended Herb had threatened to do worse things to Rexford than Rexford was accused of doing to Herb. Finally it was rumored that Herb had gone to the Hollis home with liquor on his breath and a gun in his pocket. Nobody knew how the rumor had started, but a surprising number of people were found to whisper, and then begin to say more openly, that that was like Herb.

Of course this wasn't evidence, except as to the rather surprising fact that there were a good many people in town who had a smoldering resentment against the Pences. St. Elmo Pence got wind of that in the course of the day and it troubled him. He had no more immediate worries about Herb; the boy was in bed in his own room, with a competent nurse, and though he wasn't fully conscious yet the doctor didn't expect serious consequences. But it was disgraceful to find that some citizens of Hollisburg should have turned against the side of law and order. It wasn't right. Sellers, yes, perhaps old Hollis, was setting people against him, after all he had done for this graceless town.

Colonel Hollis, as a matter of fact, hadn't spoken

to anybody to-day except Clay Sellers; and when the telephone was finally repaired, early in the afternoon, his first use of it was to call up the bank and ask for St. Elmo Pence.

"I wanted to inquire about Herb," he announced.

"Doing very well," said Pence curtly.

"I'm glad to hear it. I want you to know, Mr. Pence, that while we think you made a grave error in placing the blame for this unfortunate affair, we sympathize sincerely with you and Herb."

"Save your sympathy for people that need it," Pence barked. "Yourself, for one. I might as well make it plain to you now, Hollis, since you talked so big about your house last night, that you don't get any more money out of me. One of those mortgages on your house is going to be due October first; one on the Hollis Building, in December. And unless you get the money to pay them, and get it from somebody else, I'll set you out."

"I am fully aware of the incidence and date of my obligations," said the Colonel coldly.

"You haven't seemed to be, in the past. But you might as well understand you needn't come whining to me with any more hard-luck stories, or talk about this book of yours. Pay up the money you owe me or get out."

He hung up abruptly, conscious that he had been a little harsher than he had intended. His nerves were still shaken by what had happened to Herb. He certainly didn't intend to let Hollis have any more money, but he would perhaps have broken it more delicately if he had had time to think. How-

ever, he might as well let the old dead-beat know what was coming to him.

Ordinarily, Rexford would have been taken before a justice of the peace that day. Thanks to Pence, he wasn't; all the justices made one excuse or another for not hearing the case. At first this had been due merely to Pence's preoccupation; he wanted to be present at the hearing and he had to look after Herb. But when it appeared that Herb was doing as well as could be expected Pence concluded that they might as well wait till he recovered and could tell about the attack on him. His testimony would make the case conclusive.

Sellers might have insisted on an immediate hearing for his client, but he was busy himself that day on business which couldn't wait so conveniently as the comparatively simple matter of clearing Rexford. Either Sellers or Crisler had had an eye on the garage every moment that morning, and Raney hadn't appeared. By afternoon three mysterious strangers had arrived in town—Crisler's operatives, summoned by telephone from Chicago when Sellers had routed him out the night before. One of them climbed the hill, by an unobtrusive route, to observe the doings on the farm; the others mingled, unnoticed on this exciting day, with the groups on Main Street that were discussing the attack on Herb.

Nevertheless Crisler and Sellers were far from content. The prompt arrest of Rexford had shown that the Pences controlled the police. An effort to arrest George Blades would have to be backed by

powerful evidence before Pence would consent to his seizure and unless Pence consented time would be lost and Blades might get away. So Crisler, satisfied that nothing was likely to happen overnight, decided late in the afternoon to take the one step that could insure them against that misfortune—to go to Indianapolis and present his evidence to the Governor. He had enough to convince an impartial man, especially an otherwise impartial man who happened to be one of Pence's political foes. And with the Governor behind them they could make sure that the city and county officials would act.

So Mr. Crisler went away on the four fifty-three train, explaining to a dutiful delegation from the Chamber of Commerce that he expected to return, but had to see some of the records in the State Geologist's office; and Sellers went over to the county jail to see his client.

On his first hurried visit last night, snatched from the time he had had to give to planning things out with Crisler, Sellers hadn't had time to talk much with Rexford. He had asked him all about the circumstances of the finding of Herb, all about their fight at the club; but he hadn't thought of telling him that Ruth and her father had come down in the rain to set him to work on the case. And it didn't occur to him that Rexford's polite but inexplicable apathy was due to Ruth. Not that Rexford supposed she thought him guilty; but she had stood in adamantine silence while Flint and Pence were fastening the crime on him last night. After all, she didn't know much about him; she might have felt a sudden loath-

ing of her equally sudden emotion for him, might have tried to put him out of mind.

And at any rate, she seemed determined not to marry him—to sacrifice the rest of her life, or its best years, to her father. Throughout the long day, as Rexford paced up and down his dim-lit limestone cell, his thoughts kept coming back to that; and when he came back to that he didn't care whether he was to spend the next few years in Hollisburg, New York, or jail. One place would be just as good as the other, without Ruth.

He knew that Sellers wouldn't desert him, but he was beginning to be afraid that even Sellers was no match for the power of the Pences. He was lonely; he saw no one all day except the jail attendant who brought him an unappetizing breakfast and a dinner that was worse. Even if the light from the barred window far above him had been enough to read by, he had nothing to read—except an inscription on the wall beside the barred door, a foot above his head:

HIGH-WATER MARK
FEBRUARY 7, 1884
"AND THE WATERS WERE ABATED FROM
OFF THE EARTH."

Rexford hoped that his cell had been unoccupied when the waters got up that high. Then, as he realized what such a flood must have meant to the town—water neck-deep in all the stores on Main Street, for one thing—he perceived that there was some reason for Pence's power. Pence and his dam had ended floods forever. True, Pence had got his

percentage out of it—Sellers had described to him in gleeful detail the various exactions by which those who wanted to live in the fashionable Addition on the reclaimed bottom lands had to pay through the nose for the privilege—but the town could reasonably look on him as a public benefactor. No wonder it put up with his sudden and arbitrary punishments of crimes against his family, even if he sometimes picked the wrong man.

Then footsteps in the corridor, voices—and Clay Sellers turned the corner and came up to the door, a glum deputy sheriff behind him.

"This is a pleasure," said Rexford cheerfully. "You see, I was just thinking that I'd never heard your thoughts on the freedom of the will that you were going to lay before me the other night. And since the topic happens to be on my mind just now —especially the freedom of Mr. Pence's will——"

Sellers had come into the cell, the iron door clanging behind him; the deputy sheriff retired to the corner of the corridor and lit a cigarette.

"So they allow smokin' here," said Sellers. "In that case I'll offer you the makin's; which I suppose they took off you along with all other movable property. Freedom of the will. Now, friend Rexford, Mr. Pence's will ain't as free as you seem to think. You'll be out of here to-morrow. You'd have been out to-day if I hadn't been too blame busy on other matters of some urgency to fight for a hearing. But don't worry about that. If you'd been let go this morning a lot of these curbstone heroes would have talked about lynching you—not that they'd have had nerve enough to do it. But by to-morrow we'll have

public opinion well informed. Might as well create a pleasant atmosphere before you walk out into the light of day."

"You seem pretty confident," Rexford said nervously. "It's only my word against their circumstantial evidence."

"Their evidence ain't so circumstantial as they think. The main thing, of course, is that you're the only man with a motive."

"You can't tell me," said Rexford, "that this bird hasn't spilled motives all along his line of march. Anybody that had ever talked to him—— Good Heavens, I forgot he's lying half dead."

"Not so bad as that. Probably to-morrow he'll be able to talk; and then let's see what becomes of their circumstantial evidence. Herb's got his faults, but I don't think he'd say you hit him if he knew who did. Of course, bein' hit from behind, he may not have seen it.

"But now as to this circumstantial evidence. Herb's watch was smashed when he fell. It stopped at twelve minutes past nine. Doc Peebles is willin' to swear to that. I don't say he ain't afraid of Pence, but he's got a conscience. And Colonel Hollis —Ruth, too—will swear it was half past nine when you left the house. We all know the Colonel's watch —they set the town clock by it. And while he's got his faults, nobody would suspect him of an inclination to perjury."

"Does Pence know this?"

"Pence knows Herb's watch stopped at nine twelve. I ain't told him what time you left the house."

"But if you told him," said Rexford, "maybe he'd——"

"Call off the police? Well, maybe he would. Thereby gainin' great reputation as a just man. But if we spring this on him in court you'll get off just the same and Pence will be shown up as a man a little bit prone to jump at conclusions, even when they mean jail for somebody else. In fact, if we can get away with that, I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Pence would be kind of quiet for some time to come."

Rexford regarded his blandly smiling counselor with growing amazement.

"You're a vindictive person, aren't you, behind that cheerful grin? Well, more power to you. As for me, I'd almost got to sympathizing with Pence —and certainly with Herb. That was a pretty hard knock he got."

"Well, you needn't waste too much sympathy on Herb. When Herb tried to call on you and Ruth last night he had a gun in his pocket. Oh, yes. Doc Peebles wouldn't have mentioned that, of his own accord; but Colonel Hollis had discovered it, and when I suggested that it was queer nobody had seen it when Herb was bein' put to bed it turned out that the doc and the nurse had both seen it, now they remembered. You ain't going to be the one to come worst out of this, friend Rexford. I wouldn't go so far as to say that you could qualify as a Nemesis, but—— How are they treating you here? No third degrees?"

"You seem to have scared Flint," said Rexford, "and the sheriff hasn't bothered me."

"You're Flint's case. They lay off each other's business."

"But the meals," Rexford groaned. "Well, they make Dan Cullen's look like the Ritz."

"Well, you stand this another day and to-morrow night we'll have you right up against Dan's counter large as life—unless you're asked up to the Hollises."

Sellers watched him flush slowly.

"How—how are they taking this?" Rexford asked finally.

"Why, didn't you know?" Sellers' amazement seemed genuine; nobody could have known that he was only giving himself a chance to watch the wheels go round. "Colonel Hollis has been here twice to-day and Ruth's been here three times, tryin' to see you. But Flint got his back up and wouldn't even let 'em send in a note."

Rexford turned a handspring.

"Stone walls do not a prison make," he said cheerfully, "nor iron bars a cage."

XXIV.

A Dissolution of Partnership.

OF the leading citizens of Hollisburg the one who was least interested in Herb and Rexford that day was George Blades. And yet it had been Blades whose first exclamation, when Rexford telephoned the news of Herb's injury to the Pences, had set St. Elmo Pence's mind turning toward the idea that Rexford had done it. Blades's remark had been instinctive—for a week he had been trying unobtrusively to set the Pences against Rexford and his efforts lately had flowered into this antagonism which had culminated in the fight at the Country Club.

Blades had expected vaguely, when he began, that he could bring Herb to the point of driving Rexford, somehow, out of town. But if he were right in suspecting that Rexford was a detective sent to investigate automobile thefts, Rexford would try to keep out of the way of trouble, or anything else that stood between him and his errand. Consequently, nobody was more surprised than Blades when it had seemed at least possible that Rexford had tried to kill Herb. Either his sudden infatuation for Ruth had made him reckless, or——

Or he wasn't a detective, after all. And it was this possibility that set Blades to pondering next

day, in the garage office. If Rexford had really been a detective, he would probably have made the fact known when he was arrested for a felony. He would have sent a call for help to his home office. He had done nothing of the sort; he seemed to be relying on Sellers. So either Rexford wasn't a detective, in which case Blades had done a great deal of work for nothing; or he was a detective working for Sellers alone—and Sellers was still at large.

Something was wrong. Blades felt that all morning; and he was convinced of it, toward noon, when Raney drove a Buick into the garage. Rufe, behind locked doors in the repair shop in the back yard, was doing things to the Dodge that Raney had brought in two days before; and Blades managed to get Raney's car into the garage, and Raney out of the car, without attracting any special attention from the colored boys who were busy at odd jobs about the place. But then he took Raney into the office, shut the door behind him, and said in furious stifled tones:

"What's the idea? Come down here in broad daylight with one car after another for Main Street to look at! Do you want to get us all sent up?"

"I certainly don't," said Raney. "That's why I'm tryin' to get these things into circulation. I went out to look at this one this morning and it was stickin' out into the breeze. One end of the stack had been taken off."

"Taken off? What kind of a haystack do you——"

"It wasn't a very good haystack," Raney admitted. "In fact it was just enough of a haystack

to hide a car. But nobody could have seen the thing from outside—I'll swear to that. Either somebody went to lookin' around or else maybe the wind blew the thing loose."

"There wasn't enough wind last night to blow over a haystack, you boob—not the worst haystack in the world. Didn't you see any tracks?"

"The rain'd washed 'em away, if there was any. But I said to myself, 'Boy, you better get this car off the premises before whoever was lookin' at it comes back.'"

"Let me get caught with it, eh? Raney, if you pull a boner that trips me you'll go away with me—as far as I go and maybe farther."

"I ain't a-goin' to trip you, George. I thought if you could get this one started to wherever you send 'em I could bring the other one down after it gets dark to-night. That's the last one."

Blades was thinking it over.

"I guess you're right," he said. "Better hop right back to the farm—no telling who may be prowling around while you're away. Bring the other one down late to-night—half past ten or eleven. Hurry up, now. I'll tell Rufe."

But he didn't tell Rufe; for it was becoming apparent to Blades that things were happening which might make it necessary to do something, or go somewhere, in a hurry. He travels the fastest who travels alone. They had been a good team, he and Rufe; but it was time for him to rise into circles where Rufe wouldn't be able to follow him.

Just how this ascension was to be accomplished, without dragging Rufe along, Blades didn't know.

The Dodge could be shipped to Cincinnati to-morrow; but he might as well hold one Buick till the other had been brought in. He could get all three away to Ketzner by the middle of next week, and then, his used-car business liquidated, he'd be ready to take charge of Pence's real estate.

The middle of next week. . . . As the day wore on Blades felt some unintelligible sense of approaching evil. It was nothing he saw, nothing he heard, nothing he could reason out; but something was wrong. And about the middle of the afternoon he realized, suddenly, that the man who had just come out of Meservy's pool room with a fresh-bought cigar, a man whose face was strange to him, was the same man whom he had seen three or four times to-day—always within sight of the garage. And Blades knew every face in Hollisburg. This man was a stranger—and he obviously wasn't from one of the nearby farms. He had a city look.

He would have been more disturbed if he had known that behind the drawn shade of Nick Rexford's attic window, in Sellers' story-and-a-half house on the side street, another stranger in town was watching the yard behind the garage. But the question of numbers didn't count, anyway. Twelve hours after the dangerous Rexford had been locked up another detective had appeared to take up his watch. They were closing in.

Blades showed no sign of agitation when he went out, about five o'clock, to stroll to the Pences' house, see Leila, and perhaps look in on the stricken Herb. If he were under surveillance it wouldn't do to show signs of haste or alarm. Nevertheless, three blocks

down the street he stopped, glanced back. No one in sight. But at the next corner he saw a figure, unfamiliar before to-day, at the intersection of streets a block distant. Here in the fenceless lawns of Pence's Addition he could be shadowed from a parallel street better than in the one he was on; and certainly he was being shadowed. He would have to think, and think quickly. The first thing to do was to make certain, in so far as he could, that any blow that fell could be turned on Rufe. And there was no doubt about the best way to do that.

So when Leila received him on the wide, awning-shadowed porch, where no outer eye could see what went on behind the screen of climbing roses, she found him unusually demonstrative.

"You poor little girl, you must have had a terrible day," Blades suggested, his arms about her. "It wasn't fair that your father should have gone down to work and left you to look after everything. How is he?"

"Herb, you mean? Oh, he stirs, and tosses, and moans, but he hasn't really come to. The nurse says he seems to be improving, though; and Doctor Peebles thinks he'll be conscious some time to-night."

"Poor old Herb! Rotten trick to hit him from behind. I suppose he'll be laid up for quite a while."

"Doctor Peebles doesn't know yet. I know what you're thinking of, George. We'll have to put off the wedding."

"We certainly couldn't have a big church wedding while Herb is like this," Blades agreed. "And I suppose we'll have to have a big church wedding."

"I wonder," said Leila. "You know, George, since—since last night I've done a lot of thinking. Things that look important when everything is going smoothly don't—don't look so big when trouble comes, do they? I'm so happy that Herb isn't going to die—and I hate Ruth so——"

"I can't understand the girl," Blades confessed. "She must have been trying to make Herb jealous, and she fooled with something that was loaded."

"I'll never speak to her again," Leila vowed. "And she was my best friend, George. I don't know who can be trusted, now. I don't want to see anybody, just now—except dad and you."

"Think you could do without seeing your father for a few weeks, when Herb is a little better?" Blades asked, smiling.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, we'll have to put off the wedding if we mean to have a big one. No telling how long Herb may be laid up. On the other hand, he isn't going to—have anything happen to him; so if we wanted to get married quietly——"

Leila squeezed his hand.

"I'm so glad you were thinking of that, too."

Within ten minutes they had it all settled. They would be married on Saturday if Herb's condition permitted. On the same condition they would take their honeymoon trip to the Thousand Islands; but if Herb were still in bad shape they'd stay at home.

"I know father would like to see us settled," said Leila, "and there won't be any trouble bringing him around. Stay for supper and we'll tell him about it."

"I can't do that," said Blades. "Too much to do down at the garage if we're going to be married day after to-morrow."

Above all, he was thinking, there were certain books that had to be burned—books that would tell nothing to the casual investigator but that could be made to mean a great deal if Rufe, under inquisition, should try to shift a share of the blame to the man who had double-crossed him. Rufe, he knew, would be suspicious of this marriage, but he could do nothing. Even his suspicions might be stilled for a few days by the argument that it would give protection to them both. But Blades knew that if trouble came there would be a big difference between St. Elmo Pence's son-in-law and that son-in-law's partner; just as he knew that there would be a big difference between an actual and a prospective son-in-law.

"I suppose you'll be terribly rushed," Leila admitted. "So will I, running off with half a trousseau. But somehow I'll feel safer when we're married so we can—can face things together. My goodness, you never know what's going to happen, do you?"

"You certainly don't," said Blades. "I suppose I can run up and look at Herb for a minute."

"I think so. Don't mind if Miss Hubbard tells you to keep out. I was up there a good part of the day, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do. She's so dreadfully efficient."

But Miss Hubbard didn't tell him to keep out. She greeted him with a nod and a professional finger-to-lips gesture which didn't prevent her from talking herself, in an undertone.

"He's restless," she said, "but he's never really come out of it. I gave him a sedative at two o'clock, but it seems to be working off." She nodded toward the half-filled glass on the bedside table. "You can go up and look at him if you want to; but don't say anything. I'm going down to speak to Miss Leila for a minute."

Blades tiptoed to the bedside and looked down at the bandaged head and the flushed face. Herb was a boob, but he deserved better luck than to be slugged from behind by the man who had taken away his girl. Then, to his amazement, Herb opened one eye, both eyes, turned, sighed, and looked up at him.

"Hello, George," he muttered. "What have you done with Rufe?"

"Rufe?"

"Sure. Rufe. What did he have against me? Why didn't he stand up an' fight, like Rexford?"

"Rufe? What——"

"Must've hit me with a ball bat. Head—hurts. Did he get away?"

"Did Rufe hit you?" Blades demanded.

"Feel my head if you don't believe me. Saw him —plain as I see you. Lightning flash and——"

With another groaning sigh he tried to rise. Blades slipped an arm under his shoulders and held the glass to his lips.

"Here, old-timer. Drink a little of this."

Herb sank back, still muttering; waved a feeble hand for a moment, then turned on his side.

Blades was waiting by the door when Miss Hubbard came back.

"I'm afraid he's still delirious," he said. "Too

bad, isn't it?" He slid his hat under his arm and tiptoed out; but it was hard work not to throw his hat up into the air and whoop. This was incredible luck.

Rufe was hunched morosely in the swivel chair in the garage office. As Blades came in he started up, obviously alarmed.

"George! They're on us. I've lamped two dicks —had their eye on us all day."

Blades unlocked the desk and took out three or four small account books.

"Then this stuff goes into a bonfire as soon as it's dark. Nobody will have anything on me then."

"On you! George, if you lay down on me——"

Blades grinned at him without sympathy.

"I won't lay down on you. Nobody will have anything on you, so far as the automobile business is concerned. But why the devil did you slug Herb?"

Rufe sank back into the chair, staring.

"How—how——"

"He told me himself. Came to for a couple of seconds while I was at the house just now. No, nobody else heard him. I was with him, alone; and I filled him up as hard as I dared with the deep-sleep stuff. But he'll come to again to-morrow——"

"I'll swear he couldn't have seen me."

"But he did see you. By the lightning."

Rufe began to swear in a monotonous undertone.

"Same damn luck I've always had," he said presently. "I was sure he didn't have time to spot me; but when I saw who he was I pulled my punch. If I'd've tapped him the way I started he'd be in a coffin right now. But I caught myself when I seen

who it was. Oh, he wasn't the one I was after. I wanted this Rexford. And all day long I've been thinkin' that if I hadn't got him one way I had another. . . . What are we goin' to do now?"

Blades was humming absently.

"Well, if I were you I'd take what cash there is in the safe and start for the state line. As for me—I'm going to stay here and settle down."

Rufe rose slowly, glaring into his partner's eyes.

"You couldn't have framed it," he said in an undertone. "It was just my damn luck. But it couldn't have broke better for you if you had framed it. I take the petty cash—there might be as much as a hundred and fifty bucks—and dodge the dicks and try to get down to Louisville. And you stay here and marry the Pence girl, and when they drop on you you pin it on me. You ain't goin' to burn them books, are you? They're mostly in my handwritin'. You'll use 'em for evidence and Pence'll get you off. You——"

His spring forward was quick as the flicker of a whiplash; but Blades stepped back as quickly and Rufe looked into the mouth of a gun protruding from Blades' coat pocket.

"You said it," he remarked lightly. "I'm going to do exactly what you say; and you're going to take the loose cash—you can have the fifty or so that I've got on me, if that helps—and go your way. And the beauty of it is that I didn't frame you. It just happened. It was just your luck—and mine. And all I can say in farewell, old buddy, is that I hope your luck will pick up a little bit. Otherwise you won't get by the dicks."

Rufe subsided slowly.

"I guess you're right," he admitted. "Well—no use my makin' a break just now. Wait till it's dark."

They dined, presently, at Dan Cullen's, then came back to the garage. Rufe, used to being shadowed, could easily pick out the mysterious stranger who was looking in the window of the music store up the street. But he said nothing; he was, apparently, resigned. He went back to the garage, stowed away the bills he found in the safe while Blades' cynical eyes rested on him, and then drew his cap down over his eyes.

"So long, George," he said wearily. "I wish you luck with your wife, and your father-in-law, and your town."

"I'll have it," Blades admitted. "And luck to you, old-timer. Send me a picture postal some time."

His hand was on his gun, for he supposed that Rufe might still turn on him in desperation. But Rufe didn't. He slipped back through the garage, Blades following him; crossed the back yard; slipped the loose board out of the fence—and, after peering out a moment into the dark alley, stepped through.

"Take care of yourself, George," he whispered as he replaced the board. "I suppose you pretty well got your hands on these keys of the city I hear Pence talkin' about, ain't you?"

"Well," said Blades comfortably, "that was just my luck. Things happened to break right for me, Rufe, and wrong for you. Neither of us could help it. Luck's luck."

"Sometimes," Rufe agreed in a whisper. "And sometimes it ain't luck, it's just plain common sense. Take Pence, now. He's got the keys of the city and he's goin' to turn 'em over to you, huh? But he lost one of them keys, George. Lost it because he wouldn't pay a good hard-workin' guy ten berries more a month. And if anybody picked up that key, George, he'd be liable to unlock something with it."

"What are you talking about?" Blades demanded uneasily.

"Never mind. Give my regards to Main Street, and my love to Pence. It's a nice thrivin' town."

Blades saw him vanish into the darkness of the alley shadows; even if there were a detective on this side, as wasn't likely, he could hardly see him. After a moment Blades strolled back into the garage, humming softly.

Rufe emerged cautiously on the back street, looked up and down. Nobody in sight. There was a car at the curb, lights off; the house before which it stood was dark except for the kitchen. Rufe sidled up to the car, peered at the gasoline gauge, saw there was enough for the fifty miles which would take him to the state line—and in a moment he was driving around the corner, making as much speed as he dared, toward the river road.

He made it, without interference; drove down a mile or so, then turned cautiously aside to the construction camp. Farther down there were lights in the workmen's shanties, but here there was no one about. Rufe edged up cautiously to the shack that housed the explosives. The door was still ajar.

Now if the luck that had broken so incredibly badly against him would only even up for five minutes——

And it did. Nobody interfered with him; and presently Rufe drove a heavily loaded car very cautiously back to the river road and turned westward, toward the dam.

XXV.

Mr. Pence's Ducats, and Colonel Hollis's Daughter.

COLONEL HOLLIS mused over a stogy while Ruth was washing up the supper dishes. He hadn't been surprised by Pence's statement that the mortgages would be foreclosed; he had seen it coming ever since Sunday. Still, it threatened to confront him with a situation, and the Colonel wasn't used to looking situations in the face.

Another thing that disturbed him was Ruth's relation to Rexford. He had ventured to ask her a few questions at dinner, with the apologetic diffidence required of modern parents, and what little he had learned was disconcerting. The young people were in love but they didn't expect to get married. They had no plans. When the Colonel pressed her, as closely as he dared, Ruth had merely said that Rexford belonged in New York, and she belonged on the hill, and that was all there was to it.

Slow as the Colonel was to come to uncomfortable conclusions, he couldn't miss this one. His daughter couldn't marry the man she wanted because she and her father and her sweetheart were all broke. Nothing plus nothing, plus nothing again, equals nothing but nothing. And for these petty and sordid reasons his girl was steeling herself to send away the man she loved, was even thinking of going

to work. Well, well! Something would have to be done about this. Of course anything might happen between now and October——

The Colonel turned over this familiar and comforting supposition and finally cast it out. He'd been fooling himself long enough. The age of miracles was past. Something would have to be done; for it was unthinkable that Ruth, who had so gallantly stuck by the sinking ship of the Hollis fortunes, should throw away her own future for him. Something would have to be done and he would have to do it. And by the time Ruth had finished the dishes he had come to the conclusion that only one thing was possible—to try to make some compromise with Pence.

Not that Pence had any bowels of mercy. The Colonel didn't deceive himself about that. But—the first mortgage falling due was on the house. And the house, in these times, wasn't worth what it should be. The Hollis Building was another and more considerable matter. Its present rental value wasn't much; the Colonel had the worst-paying tenants in town, partly because he owned the oldest of the office buildings, partly because he was known to be soft-hearted and accessible to hard-luck stories. But if Pence owned it he could probably make it bring in money.

So there might be a way out. Pence, if he had the chance, would certainly prefer to take the Hollis Building in October, and the house later in the winter, rather than the other way around. Let Pence take the Hollis Building at once, and perhaps the lots on Whitcomb Avenue if he demanded his pound

of flesh. But the Colonel could live on till the New Year in the Hollis mansion; he would still have the old home and the dignity that went with it. And with the home, and the devising of a few polite fictions, it would be easy to persuade Ruth that Pence had relented and would continue something like the old arrangement, by which the mortgages were regarded as advances against the ultimate profits of the history of Hollis County.

Then neither Ruth nor her young man need hesitate on his account. They would think he was provided for; they could go on and marry. By the middle of the winter they would find out that he had deceived them, but by that time they would be married and settled; it would be too late to give way to false pride. And after that? Well, the Colonel wouldn't be a burden on his son-in-law. No, by the Eternal! Physical wants were few at his age; he could retire with his manuscript and the remnant of his books to some secluded spot—a cottage in the country, a boarding-house in town—it made no difference. There he could live in peace, a hermit scholar, and give his declining years to the completion of the history that would restore the fortunes of his family and make the name of Hollis famous till the end of time.

He rose, with such elation as he hadn't felt for years. Ruth was stubborn; she'd never marry, never think of herself at all, if she thought it would mean deserting him in time of trouble. But he would deceive her with a pious fraud. One heard much in these modern times, the Colonel reflected, about women living their own lives. Well, he'd trick Ruth

into living hers. He owed her that. Certainly he owed her that. She'd stuck to him, was ready to throw her life away out of respect for the family tradition. Mustn't let her do that. It wasn't fair.

And the Colonel felt obscurely that he must open the way to her marriage for another reason. The advent of Nick Rexford in Hollisburg, and Ruth's falling in love with him, had set in motion a chain of events whose end no man could see. Simply and solely because of that, Oliver Perry Morton Hollis was to be turned out of house and home, disgraced before the whole town. Because of that, Herb Pence, staggering in drunken uncertainty through the darkness where otherwise he would not have been, had fallen victim to some unknown assailant. Solely by a chance that never would have happened if Ruth and Rexford hadn't been looking at the view from the old Miller place, the mysterious automobile thefts that had puzzled the whole valley were in a way to be solved at last. Clay Sellers had made dark and unintelligible remarks about this. He had intimated that the trail led into high places and that incalculable consequences might follow. His manner had affected the Colonel with a vague but none the less oppressive sense of some impending doom.

All that, because Ruth had fallen in love with Nick Rexford. None of this was Rexford's doing. He had been, the Colonel piously reflected, only an instrument in the hand of Providence; but an instrument working so swiftly and surely that nobody could fail to be struck with awe. It was, thought the Colonel, who was something of a student of the classics himself, it was the operation of Nemesis, inexorable

relentless Destiny that brought down on men the consequence of their own doings and their own stubborn pride.

True, St. Elmo Pence seemed beyond the reach of Nemesis. Whatever Sellers had meant by the man higher up in the automobile thefts, he obviously didn't and couldn't mean Pence. Pence was above petty crime, he was too strong to be touched even by divine retribution. But the Colonel felt no envy of Pence, no resentment of his insistence on payment of the mortgages. Trivial, that; Pence's nature, not to be changed. No, the duty laid on Oliver Perry Morton Hollis was that of attending to one or two details which Nemesis had overlooked in the performance of more important business. If Ruth's love for Rexford had opened the way to all this damage and destruction, if it had started in motion a destiny which must work out to its end, all the more reason why Ruth and Rexford, at least, should be happy. Their happiness had been bought at a great price; they must not be defrauded out of it. The Colonel believed that Providence was too good an economist to let them miss a fruition that had cost so much, but it seemed that Providence, being preoccupied, needed a little help from Oliver Perry Morton Hollis.

It was some solace, at least, that he could do this much for his daughter. Useless he might be, so far as practical considerations went, helpless in the world of affairs, but he could do that. Of course he couldn't do it without the collusion of St. Elmo Pence, but his proposal meant money in Pence's pocket. And Pence, after all, was a father, a man

with some human kindliness; a hint of the true reason for the Colonel's proposal and he would readily consent.

"Ruth," called the Colonel, "I'm going out."

"To see Sellers?" she asked eagerly.

"No, to see Mr. Pence. Oh, not to humiliate myself; not to make any concessions. Not at all. Merely to make sure of his intentions; to learn what he purposes to do, so that we may lay our plans accordingly. You'd better have them lock up the house; I may not return till late."

For such an occasion he must dress properly. The silk hat, the frock coat, and, final touch, the scepter of the Hollis regalia—a gold-headed ebony cane inscribed in fine Spencerian script: "To General George Washington Hollis, from his associates in the Indiana Constitutional Convention. 1851." Thus attired the Colonel felt quite able to hold his own with Pence.

But at the foot of the stairs he found Ruth, bareheaded, but evidently intending to go out too.

"I can't wait here by myself while he's in jail and you're talking to Mr. Pence. Let me go with you."

"You can't do that," the Colonel cried frantically, seeing his grand structure of deceit in danger of collapse.

"Why not? We're both in it."

"Matters of business, child, are not in woman's sphere. You needn't stay at home if you don't want to, but I am responsible for our family's business dealings with Mr. Pence. Couldn't you call on some one?"

"There's nobody I want to see." She thought it

over. "Oh, I suppose I might as well go to the movies. There's a Fairbanks picture on this week; that ought to take my mind off things if anything will. Can you stop at the theater for me on your way home? Then we might go around and see if Sellers knows anything new."

In the gathering dusk the Colonel walked slowly along Willow Boulevard, the river-front driveway bounding Pence's Addition, the most fashionable street in town. Bungalows to the left, to the right the river; the sidewalk on that side was girded by an iron railing, and beyond, at the bottom of a six-foot concrete retaining wall, was the gravelly bed through which the river flowed in summer. And, thanks to Pence's dam, that bed now contained it in winter too.

One stucco bungalow after another, each with its white trellis marking off the backyard line behind its white stucco garage. From open doors, from screened porches, came the clatter of voices, the shrill screaming of phonographs, the crying of children. All this had been cornfield a few years ago. The Colonel had to admit that Pence had done a good deal for Hollisburg.

But more for Pence. There was a rather terrible social pressure on young couples who married and wanted to count as somebody. They had to live in Pence's Addition; if they possibly could they had to live on Willow Boulevard. Naturally a good many tried both who couldn't. Pence's terms were harsh. His flood-insurance rates were exorbitant; but there was no use trying to buy land in the Addition if you didn't take out flood insurance. Perfectly needless,

of course, but you had to do it. Pence's real estate company drove a hard bargain on second mortgages; Pence's bank, free from any serious competition, was none too easy on first mortgages. Foreclosures were prompt and merciless and there had been a good many of them since the Addition was opened. More than one young couple had lost their savings and faced a cheerless future because they felt that they had to live where their friends lived. The Colonel had heard of these things in the big cities, but it was unnatural to introduce such troubles into Hollisburg, where land was cheap—if it happened to be in some other quarter.

A bad business. A bad business. Progress, the Colonel conceded, was on the whole a good thing. The world couldn't stand still; the old well-mannered ease of Hollisburg had passed forever. Progress was bound to come; but at every forward step Pence collected his percentage. In one way or another he had levied on everybody in town. Payment for service, yes; but double what the service was worth.

Worse than that, he had debauched the town. A whole generation had taken him as its model. Hustle, pep, sharp practice and hard dealing; ostentatious display of money acquired by methods that would hardly meet the approval of a gentleman. If progress had to come, might it not have come in some other way, under some other leadership—without loss of contact with the older standards? If the Hollises—if Oliver Perry Morton Hollis—had tried to direct the current instead of letting it flow past unheeded, might it not have been better not only for them, but for the town?

Ah, well! It was too late now to regret what might have been done better. After all, he, the Colonel, wasn't a man of action. He was a student, a critic, a philosopher. He would write the history of Hollis County instead of making it. And yet——

But here he was in front of Pence's castle. The hour of trial was at hand.

St. Elmo Pence, too, had been thinking things over that night. Recent happenings had shaken him up. His only son had had a narrow escape from death; his only daughter was to be married day after tomorrow. Of course he had been looking forward to Leila's marriage; but its sudden imminence rather upset him, none the less. His little girl was going away from him; that was what it amounted to even if she and her husband continued to live in his house. He was handing her over to George Blades. No doubt it was all right, but he wished they wouldn't be in such a hurry. He had feebly tried to persuade Leila to put it off; but after all, a date had already been set; and if they would have to substitute a quiet home wedding for the grand church affair that they had planned they might as well have it now as later. Things were slipping out of his hands. Blades would take over the direction of the real estate business; before long St. Elmo Pence would have his grandchildren to think about; the day of his autocratic control of Hollisburg was approaching its end.

But he wasn't through yet. He'd see that justice was done to this young ruffian who had attacked his son—a good stiff penitentiary sentence. He'd take no more nonsense from that pompous old fraud Hol-

lis, whose sour-faced daughter had got Herb into this trouble——

And then a white-coated colored boy appeared with the news that Colonel Hollis wanted to see him.

What earthly errand could Hollis have here to-night? Ah! The mortgages, of course. Probably the old fool had gone on thinking that Pence would let him keep his house, even after Ruth's rejection of Herb. To-day he had been disillusioned; and he was probably trying to beg off. Well, he'd get what was coming to him.

"He's on the porch, sir," said the boy.

"All right. I'll talk to him."

A full, rotund figure, pink-faced, cream-clad, Pence appeared in the doorway like the incarnate god of Prosperity. In his presence Colonel Hollis' silk hat and frock coat looked their age; and the Colonel too. Pence was touched to a momentary compunction; the poor old fossil wasn't worth the powder to blow him up. Might as well let him down easy—but he was certainly going to be let down.

"Well, Colonel," said Pence with the official joviality of the president of the Chamber of Commerce, "what brings you here? Sit down."

The Colonel laid his hat and stick on a wicker table and settled into a wicker armchair, loaded with florid cushions.

"A matter of—er—rather private business," he confessed. "That is, if you're able to discuss business to-night. How's the boy? We're most frightfully distressed about——"

"Getting on all right. Still sleeping, but he'll probably be able to tell us about it to-morrow."

"I'm delighted to hear that. Delighted. Aside from the fact that the unfortunate event occurred on my property we all know the unhappy circumstances which——"

The reference to "my property" was infelicitous; it persuaded Pence that the old man still thought he was going to be let off. The banker stiffened, but was still mindful of the duties of hospitality.

"Yes, yes. We won't discuss that. Can I offer you a little something, Colonel?"

"No, thanks. At my age, and with my blood pressure—— You're a younger man than I, Mr. Pence; but your collar fits you pretty tight and I wonder that you still keep it up."

The Colonel had only wanted to be neighborly; he grew up in a day when everybody's miseries were the chief topic of conversation in Hollisburg. But Pence frowned.

"I can look after my health, Colonel. Jasper! A Scotch highball—just one. What's this matter of business, now?"

The Colonel cleared his throat.

"The information you gave me over the telephone to-day, sir, was not unexpected. About the mortgages. I had realized that they were going to fall due pretty soon; and it will serve no purpose to deny that I don't see how I'm going to find the money to meet them."

He paused; Pence took a long drink from his highball, and set the glass down with a vicious bang.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing right now, Colonel.

You don't get another cent out of me. I mean it. I'm through."

"You told me that this morning, sir," said the Colonel with dignity, "and I assumed you meant it."

"Then what's your idea?"

"Mr. Pence, the Hollis Building has a certain value. I don't say that if it were flung on the market for immediate sale it would be likely to realize more than the amount of the mortgages. Still it has a value—a commercial value. I'm afraid I can't say as much for the old homestead."

"You didn't talk that way when you borrowed money on mortgages on the old homestead."

"Six thousand dollars, Mr. Pence. Six thousand dollars all told, for a place that cost more than fifty thousand half a century ago. Ah, well—it's run down; I know that. It's out of the way for present tastes. You, sir, came to town too late to know the great days when the grand old mansion on the hill was the center of a society which had its faults, no doubt; but which had a manner, Mr. Pence; a manner. Ah, well! We must get down to details. I have certain reasons, Mr. Pence, not purely sentimental, for wanting to retain the homestead as long as possible. I realize that that will not be long; but if you could arrange to make some sort of transfer so that that October mortgage could be shifted to the Hollis Building——"

"What sort of swindle are you trying to put over on me?"

"Swindle, sir! Watch your language, Mr. Pence. Have a care. I propose a simple business transac-

tion which will have the result of giving you the Hollis Building somewhat earlier than you would ordinarily get it—in October, to be exact, instead of December or January. And instead of giving up the house in October I'd hold it till the middle of winter, when the next mortgage falls due. After that, sir, I shall yield you what will have become your own."

Pence was frowning into his tall glass.

"I don't get this at all," he announced. "Why should you want to ball everything up by that kind of jugglery?"

"I have some—er—personal reasons."

"I'll bet they're personal," Pence jeered. "So personal you can't tell me what they are."

"I shall tell you everything, Mr. Pence." The Colonel struggled powerfully against rising wrath. For Ruth's sake he mustn't anger Pence. He could make possible her marriage to Rexford only with Pence's help.

"Mr. Pence, I am proposing this transaction for the sake of my daughter's happiness. Her whole future depends on it——"

"And I suppose," Pence interrupted, "that you think I care a whole hell of a lot for her happiness, don't you? Did you think I'd swallow a story like that? Hollis, I didn't think it was in you. I can't see through this thing at all; and there aren't many business layouts that I can't see through at a glance. But it won't do you any good. I don't see your game, but I know there's something wrong if you want to give me your only income-producing property two months early so as to hold on to that old

ruin you live in. Not even you would be crazy enough to do that. No, sir. You've figured out some way to beat me out of one or the other, or maybe both. But you won't do it. That mortgage on the house, due October 1st, will be foreclosed if you don't have the cash down at the bank on October 1st. I can wait for the Hollis Building; but sooner or later I'll get them both. Think you can beat me, do you, at my own game?"

The Colonel picked up his hat and stick.

"No, sir, I never entertained any such idea. And I realize now my credulity in supposing that you could ever understand anything but what you appropriately term your own game. The instincts of a gentleman, sir, are not in you. I serve notice on you, Mr. Pence, that hereafter, when I pass you on the street, I shall ignore you."

Pence laughed harshly.

"That's good. Ignore me, will you? Jasper! Another one! Why, you poor old barnacle, don't you know you'd have starved to death ten years ago if I'd ignored you? What are you going to live on?"

"I have my resources, sir."

"Those Whitcomb Avenue lots, I suppose."

"Well, sir, they're not to be disregarded. I am aware that I still owe you fifty dollars that you lent me to pay the taxes. You were obliging enough not to take a mortgage, but I shall pay that obligation with the others."

"Take a mortgage on those lots? You couldn't sell them for cow pasture. You can't sell them for fifty dollars. Everybody comes to the Addition."

"Very possibly that is true," observed the Colonel. "Our family's straitened circumstances are well known. Nevertheless, sir—from this night on I shall ignore you."

"You won't," Pence declared. "Within a week after I've taken over the Hollis Building you'll come whining to me for some kind of disguised handout. You can't support yourself."

The Colonel was stung by fury to a great declaration.

"I am not afraid of work, Mr. Pence."

"Work? What kind of work could you do? Is there any job on earth—— Yes, I know one. You can have it now, if you want it. They need a new night watchman at the dam; that's about your speed."

The Colonel's hand, resting on the gold head of his cane, shook with anger; his eyes flashed; his shirt front heaved itself up.

"Mr. Pence, I shall not descend to an exchange of abusive personalities. In that field I recognize your superiority. Good night, sir."

As he put on his silk hat a telephone bell began to ring, inside the house. It kept on, insistently; but Pence heard the patter of Leila's feet on the stairs, and disregarded it. Leila's telephone business was of incredible volume. And Hollis' last remark had struck down deep into St. Elmo Pence, down to the sore spot that had festered in him ever since his first day in Hollisburg, when he had observed, and wondered at, the respect shown by the old residents toward Colonel Hollis.

"So you recognize my superiority in something,

do you? Well, by Jupiter! I'm surprised. I thought you old families up on the hill had the idea that you were superior to everybody in everything. Bah! Hollis, you and your kind make me sick. You had this town once, and you didn't know what to do with it. You let it go to pieces—slide out of your hands. I came along and picked it up and put it back on the map and what thanks have I ever got from you? Call yourselves an aristocracy. Hell! Aristocracy means the best people, and the best people are the people who make things go. I've made this town and it's my town and I'll do what I want with it.

"Why, Hollis, you've been living on me for the last ten years—always with this old threadbare story of your history that you've got to finish—need money to live on while you complete your life work. Life work! Who cares about the history of Hollis County? You wouldn't sell a hundred copies, even if you ever finished it. I've made the only history of Hollis County that anybody cares about; and I've supported you for ten years because I didn't like to see an old landmark washed away. Some men, when they make money, go in for art and buy Rembrandts and stuff like that. I've supported you instead; I've kept you hung in the front parlor with all the dust on you as the most ramshackle historic antiquity Hollis County could show. And now that I'm tired of you I'll throw you out on the junk heap like any other——"

A clatter of soft-shod feet on the floor within, and Leila appeared in the doorway, white and trembling.

"Father! They've blown up the dam!"

XXVI.

Hollisburg Hears Its Master's Voice.

ST. ELMO PENCE rose slowly, clinging to his wicker chair; his face was as purple as Leila's was pale.

"The dam?" he muttered. "It can't be. Who'd do it? It isn't true!"

"But it is," Leila wailed, her voice rising to a shriek. "They phoned from the club. They heard the explosion and the water's running out of the pool! Oh, my! oh, my! Oh, what——"

A din of confused shouts rose down the street. From one of the nearby bungalows came a woman's scream, shrill and prolonged. A rising murmur; and then, farther back in the town, broke out the clangor of the fire bell.

St. Elmo Pence clenched his hands, swallowed, swallowed again, pulled at his collar, and fell forward on the grass rug. Leila's wail died to a horrified gurgle; she swayed.

"Stop it!" the Colonel barked. "Don't you faint, Leila; don't you dare faint. Enough of you Pences on your backs now. There—that's better. You run upstairs and tell Miss Hubbard, and you and she bring Herb down—quick! The two of you can carry him. Now where are those boys——"

They were there, shaking in an agony of fear, the

two house boys starting back at sight of the prostrate Pence, while Berry, the chauffeur, came running down from the farther end of the porch.

"Berry!" The Colonel's voice cracked like a shot. "Get out the car—the big car. Hurry up. Confound it, I'll lay my stick over your back! Bring it to the steps and stop here. You boys take Mr. Pence and get ready to put him in." He peered inside; Leila and the nurse, at Herb's head and feet, were already bringing him down the stairs.

"This way," the Colonel called. "Here, Berry." The big car shot out from behind the house, then slowed down as the driver caught the Colonel's eye. The other boys lifted Pence in, then took Herb from the two women and laid him beside his father.

"Everybody here?" the Colonel asked. "All right. Now, Leila, drive right up to my house and stay there till the trouble's over. Here's my key. And you'd better stop at Doctor Peebles's office on the way, if you can find him."

"Aren't you coming?" Leila demanded from the front seat. "Why, Colonel—you'll be drowned!"

"Drive on!" he ordered. "I'll look after myself."

The car shot out into the street and the Colonel followed it at a more dignified pace. The shouting was incessant now; in front of the bungalows down the street people were running to and fro, trying to start cars, dragging out furniture in senseless panic. Panic—that was it. Pence's Addition was in a panic, the town was in a panic; and the man to whom the town would have looked for leadership had collapsed.

"By the Eternal!" growled Colonel Hollis. "They need somebody to bring them up sharp."

He ran, as fast as he could, down to the corner where a score of frightened people were trying to get their cars out of each other's way. Some of them were still trying to load in clocks, books, boxes, pictures. They were jammed. Children were wailing, men were shouting contradictory orders, women were crying helplessly, and over it all rose the horrible brazen voice of the fire bell.

"My mother was at Johnstown," a woman wailed from the nearest lawn. "Oh, Bert, do hurry—do hurry."

"Stop!" the Colonel roared. "Attention!"

And they stopped and gave attention. It was the Colonel's oratorical voice, the voice that could fill the fair grounds on the Fourth of July, that could resound all over the courthouse square at a political meeting. But there was a note in it to-night that Hollisburg had never heard—the voice of William Hollis, heartening his settlers behind the stockade to beat off the Indians; the voice of General George Washington Hollis, rallying his brigade at Buena Vista. It was authority, innate and unquestioned; and authority was what Hollisburg needed to-night.

"This isn't Johnstown," the Colonel shouted. "The valley's a mile wide. You haven't got all the time in the world, but don't lose your heads.

"There was thirty-four feet of water in the reservoir this morning. That's less than half the volume that went into the eighty-four flood, and you've all seen the marks of that flood on the courthouse and jail. I was on the flood commission and I know.

On the other side of Emery Street you'll be safe; at most you'll get your feet wet.

"Now load those cars with women and children. No men—the women can drive. Run down to Emery Street, then get out and make the first man you meet bring your car back. Anybody that can't find a place in the first load go upstairs and stay there. You'll have time to get out."

There was a swirl, a rushing murmur, from the river bed across the street.

"Here she comes!" shouted a man in the background.

"Yes, you white-livered coward," the Colonel shouted, "here she comes. But you'll all have time to get away. See?" He crossed Willow Boulevard to the pavement along the river bed, peered over. The water was rising fast, in angry swirls, but it was still two feet below the curb. He leaned back against the iron railing.

"Now, you helpless, worthless sheep without a shepherd, I'm going to stay here till every one of you is out of sight. If anybody's drowned I'll be the first. So long as you can see my hat, you're all right. Now do what I told you. Cal Truman! Your wife can drive your car. Leave her to look after the children. You run down to Turpie Street and pass them the same orders. Let's see if you deserved that D. S. C. you got in France. Van Sickles, you're a bachelor. Go down the boulevard and pass the word. Never mind your things—they'll stay here, with maybe a little mud on them. Get the children out and leave your radio sets. Hurry, and keep your heads!"

They hurried, but somehow they *did* keep their heads. Perhaps they were helped by the spectacle of Oliver Perry Morton Hollis, his back against the iron railing, his silk hat on his head, his hand resting lightly on the gold-headed ebony stick. The water was rising with a roar, now. But it had had four miles to come and thousands of acres of bottom land to spread over before it reached the town. The Colonel thought his calculation was correct; he stuck to his belief even after the water had crept over the retaining wall and was swirling about his feet. The first actual touch of it was cold, cold as death; but you could get used to it. And whether his calculation was correct or not he had to stay. This perverse generation of Hollisburgers required a sign.

There came a trickle down the inner gutter. It had broken over the wall far up the boulevard. But the houses beyond were empty now; the lawns, covered with the first spreading sweep of water, were empty but for books, clocks, sofa cushions, chairs, carried out in the first panic and dropped when the Colonel had begun giving orders. There was still shouting and confusion farther back in town, but Willow Boulevard seemed to have been cleared.

The water had reached his knees by now. His task was ended; he was free to get away. But it was slow walking through the swirling current, rising higher every moment. He crossed the street, found the water midway up his thighs. Then a man splashed down the side street—Cal Truman.

"They're all out, Colonel. Hurry!"

"I'm hurrying," the Colonel answered. Truman,

forty feet farther inland, where the water was lower, flung out a long light rope, the end weighted with a baseball bat. It fell upstream of the Colonel, swept down around his legs.

"Haul yourself up on that," Truman called. "Hang on and I'll pull. It ain't so deep over here."

Hand over hand the Colonel went toward him while Truman's powerful muscles strained farther inshore. Gradually they made it—still thigh deep, both of them, but not a block away from Willis Avenue where the water had hardly begun to run yet.

"You will throw it into me about that D. S. C., will you?" Truman grunted. "Come, now; hold on to my arm."

The Colonel was puffing, but he reflected with some pride that his blood pressure had stood a good deal more than Pence's. And the silk hat still sat proudly on his head, the ebony cane was still clutched under his arm.

"They're scairt to death in town," Truman panted as they toiled on toward safety. "Think all Main Street's goin'."

"Main Street may get a dash of it," said the Colonel, "but there isn't enough water in the reservoir to do much more than that. Any houses gone yet?"

"You'd think everything was gone, to hear people talk. Haven't seen any. There, Colonel; we can go faster now. Ah!" A car swept down the street toward them, sheets of water spraying out from beneath its churning wheels. It was Clay Sellers' new Ford.

"Hop in, Colonel," he called. "This boat is all right for inland waters, but she's no ocean-going craft. Better hurry, too; I never got my driver's license, and if Flint sees us he'll lock me up."

"Have you seen anything of Ruth?" the Colonel asked.

"Ruth? Where is she?"

"She was at the movie theater."

"Then she's all right," said Sellers. "Fire regulations say it's got to be capable of bein' emptied in three minutes, but I hear it didn't take 'em more than three seconds to get out. Never saw such a town. Everybody runnin' around like a chicken with its head off—the mayor as bad as the rest. They need somebody to take hold of 'em. Where's Pence?"

"Mr. Pence has had some sort of stroke," the Colonel informed him. "I don't doubt that if he were able he'd take control of the situation; but he's down and out. Your wife and children safe, Truman?"

"At her mother's, up on the hill."

"Then you two boys come up to my office. We'll get a few of the cooler heads together and try to restore some sort of order."

Ruth was sitting in the movie theater with her eyes closed. Not even Fairbanks could take her mind off this heap of troubles that seemed to be piling up higher every day. Suppose Rexford were freed of the charges against him? They couldn't be married. He'd have to go back to New York;

she and her father would have to face the impenetrable future.

A rustle about her; the whir of the projecting machine was suddenly silenced. Jim Jackson, the manager of the theater, was out before the screen, trying desperately to keep his voice normal.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he was saying, "please keep cool. Keep cool. Please leave the house very quietly. Walk, don't run."

"What is it?" yelled a man in the balcony.

"Something's happened to the dam——"

There was a scream from the front row; heads shot up suddenly, figures tumbled out into the aisle.

"Please keep cool," Jackson pleaded. Then the fire bell broke out and its hideous note would have shaken the morale of Cæsar's Tenth Legion. The audience surged up in a single wave and Ruth found herself fighting to keep her balance, hands braced against her hips and elbows out.

Luckily, somebody had broken out the emergency fire doors that opened on the alley and most of the crowd poured, pushed and tumbled out that way. In a moment Ruth was able to keep herself up; then, wedged tightly in the crowd that was forcing itself down the aisle, she was literally shot out into Main Street. It was in tumult. Groups of men with waving arms were rushing this way and that; other men, shouting, leaned from second-story windows; beneath the overriding clamor of the fire bell sounded a dissonance of horns as motor cars drove furiously up and down and through the cross streets. Ruth hooked an arm about a lamp post and considered. Her father had gone to Pence's. But

Pence would have heard of the disaster before any one else; they'd all be getting out. Already the vanguard from the nearer streets of Pence's Addition was flooding into Main Street like a mob of Anatolian refugees. Her father would have time to reach safety.

But Nick Rexford was locked in jail. He could get out only if the sheriff brought him out. Ruth had seen the sheriff at the movie, and having once been shown through the jail with the rest of the high-school class in civics and government, she remembered that inscription on the wall—the high water mark of 1884.

Ruth had no statistics in her head about the volume of water in the reservoir. For all she knew there might be enough to swamp the whole town. But if Nick Rexford was going to be caught in the jail like a rat in a trap she would be caught with him. Running, like everybody else, but running with cool foresight, carefully avoiding the other runners who blocked the pavements and overflowed into the roadway, she set out toward the jail.

George Blades sat in the garage office, thoughtfully perusing his books. Such of them as related to dealings in used cars were, naturally, cryptic and unintelligible—except to a man who had the key. But for the necessity of keeping track of the split of profits between partners who knew each other too well to trust each other there would have been no books at all. He wasn't sure that these books could ever be read, no matter what might be discovered about his transactions by other means. But at any

rate nearly all the entries had been made by Rufe. Only a few pages bore his handwriting; and these pages he laboriously cut out, taking care to remove their companion sheets in the other half of the folio. Not more than a dozen altogether; and nobody could tell that they had ever been there at all.

The shades were down. Blades stooped down on the concrete floor, lit a match and burned the sheets of paper carefully, one by one. The black ashes he ground under his heel. That was done. It shouldn't be difficult, now, for St. Elmo Pence's son-in-law to convince anybody that he had been innocently involved by a dishonest partner.

Then he heard the fire bell.

Mildly interested, he stepped out on the sidewalk; found himself suddenly caught by the excitement blazing out in the shoutings and runnings; looked in vain for a fiery glare.

"Where is it?" he called to Meservy of the pool room.

"Run!" yelled Meservy, suiting the action to the word. "The dam's busted."

The dam! Blades had lived long enough in Hollisburg to see all the ancient flood marks, to imbibe the tradition of past destructive inundations. The town would be swept away. At any rate Pence's Addition would be swept away, and Blades knew rather more than most people about the condition of the flood-insurance company. Pence was ruined. And if Pence was ruined, George Blades was ruined, too. The safe and glorious prospect of prosperity and power that had opened before him an hour ago was gone. Bankruptcy—probably the penitentiary.

No need to wonder what Rufe's last words had meant now.

For the first time in years he didn't know what to do. Leila, his fiancée, was in the area of instant danger. She was a nice kid, but she was the daughter of St. Elmo Pence. And St. Elmo Pence had suddenly changed from an asset to a liability.

Blades swerved about, dashed into the deserted garage and started his own light roadster. He climbed into the seat, then sat still a moment, cursing silently. Not a cent in the safe; not a cent in his pockets. He had given it all to Rufe. Two blocks up Main Street he could turn off toward the hill road that led up on the ridge past the old Miller place. There was safety from the floods, a way of escape from the hazards of Hollisburg—for in this general panic the watching detectives seemed to have disappeared too. Still, there was Leila. And above all there was the never-ceasing fire bell, its brazen hammering shaking loose the most firmly founded resolution, disturbing the most methodical thought. When he drove out of the door and started up Main Street he still didn't know whether he was going to turn right, toward Pence's house, or left toward the hill road.

The street was full of cars. At the first corner two approached him, side by side, crowding him toward the curb. A woman with a baby in her arms and an older child clinging to one hand had started across the street. From the two cars flying toward them she shrank back, straight in the path of Blades's roadster. He swerved——

Civilization, with George Blades, had begun at

the bottom and never gone more than halfway. His conscious mind, his cool, detached will, would in this critical moment have run ruthlessly over anybody who got in his path. But his muscles had been disciplined in the laws of a society which holds that you must try to miss pedestrians, particularly women and children. And his civilized muscles acted before his predatory brain could check them. He swerved; one wheel struck the projecting faucet of the fire plug on the corner; and he was pitched out, head foremost, over the mud guard, to strike the front wheel of the nearer of the two cars driving past him. He went down; the wheel passed over him.

Ruth, almost breathless, came in sight of the jail. There was a light in the second story of the sheriff's house, to which the jail was a sort of annex; and she wouldn't admit that it might have been left burning by somebody who had already fled. She ran up to the door, flung it open, ran upstairs.

The sheriff's wife, a huge square-faced woman, met her in the upper hall, a half-filled suit case in her arms.

"Dear, dear, dear, dear," she was muttering. "What——"

"Are the prisoners out?" Ruth asked.

"There ain't but one in there."

"Well, is he out?"

"Who'd let him out? Sim's gone to the movies. Dear, dear, he might be drowned. He wouldn't've run off an' left me——"

"Your prisoner can't run off," said Ruth. "He'll drown. Go down and unlock the door."

The square face gaped at her.

"My merciful, I never thought of that. Let him out, woman? I can't let him out."

"I'll be responsible for him if we aren't all drowned."

"Sim's got the keys with him."

"You've got two sets of keys," said Ruth. "I know it. You showed some of us from high school through the jail when your husband was away. Let him out."

"I dassent."

"Where are those keys?"

The Hollis voice of command was rising from the lower depths of heredity to-night. The sheriff's wife trembled and stepped back.

"I dassent——"

Ruth's arm, hardened by long practice with the broom and the scrubbing brush, was around her shoulders and gripping her tight; Ruth's strong fingers were at her throat.

"Give me the keys," she insisted in a voice that was inflexibly hard. "I'll choke you if you don't."

The rolling eyes of the sheriff's wife turned toward a desk by the banister. Ruth dragged her to it, released a hand to pull open the drawer. Half a dozen keys, on a ring.

"Which one?" she demanded.

The sheriff's wife, her throat released from that iron clutch, gasped and vainly tried to speak. Her hand fell on one, then another. Ruth let her go

and ran downstairs. A steel door yielded to the first key; she was in a stone-walled corridor. Around the corner, lit by a single bulb, and she could dimly see Rexford peering through the barred door.

"What's the excitement?" he called. "Did Hollisburg get the sanitarium?"

Stumbling, she ran to him; his cry of astonishment as he recognized her was silenced as their lips met between the bars.

Then she tried to fit the key into the lock. It didn't work. Another; then another. At last it gave, just as the lights failed all about them. The flood had reached the power house. Ruth turned the key, swung open the door, and, reaching blindly, stumbled into his arms.

"The dam's broken," she panted. "Come."

They felt their way out into the corridor, around the turn, and then out from its utter blackness into the gray dusk of a starlit night.

"The river's that way," said Ruth. "If we keep to the left maybe we can stay ahead of the water." So they picked their way in a stumbling trot, arm in arm, while she told him as much as she knew about the disaster.

"Where's your father?" he asked.

"I don't know. He'd gone to Pence's. I suppose they all got away, but——"

Rexford squeezed her hand.

"Well, we'll see if there's any sign of him downtown—as far as you can see anything in this darkness. They must have some lights up on Main Street."

And they had—a few lanterns bobbing here and there, giving little light but much reassurance to a race grown unaccustomed to the dark. Main Street, Ruth noticed, was much quieter. The panic seemed to have been subdued. Perhaps the improvement was due to the fact that the water hadn't reached them. From the shouts exchanged between gropers in the darkness they learned that the flood had come only halfway down the block this side of Emery Street, and that was two blocks away. The worst seemed over—or had seemed over until a new and menacing complication of which they heard dim rumors as they made their way up Main Street.

Then Ruth caught his arm.

"Look, Nick! There's a light in the office."

A faint golden glow shone down from the second-story corner room in the Hollis Building. They crossed the street, thrust their way into the door past a group of men coming down, started up the stairway which somebody had lit with a candle.

"Who's this?" said a voice above them. "Can't get in here except on business. This is the emergency committee of safety."

"I'm Ruth Hollis. Do you know what's become of my father?"

"Right in, Miss Ruth." The sentinel flung open the door, and the two found themselves blinking in the light from an oil lamp on the Colonel's open desk and three or four candles set on the mantelpiece. The Colonel was at the desk, in the glory of frock coat and silk hat; and the room was full of men. The mayor was there, the sheriff, Jim

Harby, Cal Truman, Clay Sellers, and three or four more.

"Here she is, Colonel," cried Sellers. The Colonel stood up, and Ruth stared at him in astonishment. He looked like the portrait that hung in their dining-room at home—the portrait of General George Washington Hollis.

"Why, child, why didn't you go home—up on the hill?"

"I had to get Nick out. They'd have let him drown."

The Colonel's eyes swept around to the sheriff; and that official, in the act of rising to claim his prisoner, sat down again.

"A trifle thoughtless of you, Sim, wasn't it? Well, I suppose we must legalize this jail delivery. Squire, give this boy the hearing you denied him yesterday, and make it quick. We haven't time to waste."

Justice of the Peace Holliday came forward from an obscure corner.

"As counsel for the defendant," said Sellers, "I waive a hearing and consent to wait for the grand jury—if you'll parole him in my custody."

"Do as he says, squire," the Colonel commanded. "Sellers will be responsible for him. Or, if you prefer, I'll be responsible for him. All right. Now we'll get back to work. Ruth, I want you to answer the telephone. Refer complaints of looting or disorder to the mayor; reports of marooned families to the sheriff; calls for medical aid to Jim Harby. Anything of special urgency to me. Now, Rexford, can you pull an oar?"

Rexford nodded.

"All right. Report to Dan Cullen at the bottom of the stairs. You'll fill out his squad. The reservoir's pretty well drained, but the wreck of a barn has jammed up against the railroad bridge and the water's backing up again. Cal, have you phoned the harness store for the dynamite?"

"Yes, sir. They'll have it ready when Dan comes."

"Good. Now about commandeering all the lanterns——"

Rexford had time to exchange only a single glance with Ruth, already at the telephone, before he turned toward the stairs. Clay Sellers chuckled as he passed:

"Row like a lion, brother. And be your oriflamme this night the plug hat of Hollis."

XXVII.

Nemesis Mops Up.

B. F. CRISLER never wasted either time or money. When he had a chance to sleep he took it; for in his business there frequently were occasions when sleep had to give place to other things. He had an appointment with the Governor for ten o'clock Friday morning; so he slept till half past nine, breakfasted hastily on rolls and coffee, and on the way to his taxicab stopped at the hotel news stand only long enough to pick off a morning paper and thrust it into his pocket, to be read at a time of more leisure.

He was shown promptly into the Governor's office, to find that statesman in conference with another person.

"Mr. Crisler? Delighted to see you. Shake hands with Adjutant General Simms."

"How do you do, General? If I'm intruding on affairs of state——"

"Oh, nothing confidential," said the Governor. "We're just waiting for reports from Hollisburg."

"Hollisburg?" Crisler repeated, wondering if something had been put over in his absence.

"Yes. Why, of course—I'd forgotten. Your business was with Hollis County, too, wasn't it? Well, I suppose after what's happened it isn't quite so urgent, is it?"

"After what's happened? I don't follow you, Governor."

"Haven't you read the paper?"

Crisler took it out of his pocket and read:

HUNDREDS MISSING IN
FLOOD-SWEPT HOLLISBURG
AS DAM IS BLOWN UP

Vengeful Hobos Believed Responsible
For Outrage That Ravages
Willow Valley

PANIC FOLLOWS—STARVATION LOOMS

"I plead guilty to being behind the times," he confessed. "If you'll excuse me I'll catch up."

But he couldn't catch up completely, for the last dispatch, reporting the successful dynamiting of a mass of wreckage caught on the railroad bridge, was dated only a little after midnight. The flood was receding, but the extent of the damage was unknown. The news was scrappy, contradictory; evidently he would have to go to Hollisburg after all. He read on, to the last paragraph:

A pathetic incident of the disaster was the death in an automobile crash of George Blades, Main Street garage owner, who was to have been married on Saturday. He was upset turning a corner while hastening to his fiancée's home to help her to safety.

Crisler took off his spectacles and wiped them thoughtfully; already he had seen Rufe's name in the provisional list of missing.

"You're right, Governor. My business isn't quite so urgent now. . . . Is that the latest?"

The Governor tossed a sheet of paper across the desk.

"There's a copy of a telegram I sent at nine o'clock to St. Elmo Pence. He's the big man down there. Duplicates to the mayor and the sheriff, to make sure. We ought to be getting an answer shortly; and then, General, we'll know what's needed."

Crisler read:

INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA,
August 8.

ST. ELMO PENCE,
Hollisburg, Indiana.

Distressed by news of disaster. All forces of State at disposal of Hollisburg. Wire at once what is needed. Battalion of National Guard can be entrained immediately if needed for preservation of order. Advise if declaration of martial law desirable. Red Cross and other relief agencies have food and medical supplies ready for shipment when railroad traffic is restored. Credits can be opened at once for further purchases if necessary. Tell us what is required and we are ready to supply it.

COLFAX WIMBOROUGH, Governor.

"I suppose my errand has only a historical interest now," said Crisler. "But you never can tell. If you can give me a few minutes to clear things up, Governor——"

"Now?"

Mr. Crisler was not to be diverted.

"Now," he said. "Probably you won't have much time for me after you've heard from Pence."

"All right," the Governor assented. "Make it quick, for I think I'd better go down to Hollisburg myself. They'll need me to coördinate the relief and rescue work, sanitary and police measures, and so on. We public servants have to be on the job, you know, Mr. Crisler. Now what's on your mind? . . . Oh—just a moment."

From the outer office a boy was bringing in a telegram. The Governor opened it, read it with impassive face, showed it to the Adjutant General and then handed it over to Crisler.

HOLLISBURG, INDIANA,
August 8.

HON. COLFAX WIMBOROUGH,
State House, Indianapolis.

As Chairman Emergency Committee of Safety have received your telegram to St. Elmo Pence, who is physically incapacitated. Also to city and county authorities working under direction of this committee. Reports of disaster greatly exaggerated. Only known death due to incidental automobile accident. List of missing now reduced to nine, and hope that they may yet be heard from.

Fully appreciating your offer of assistance we are proud to say we need none. Emergency measures have insured food supply and distribution. Railroad service now fully resumed and interurban line will be clear this afternoon. Perfect order has been maintained. Material loss will be heavy but local capital is prepared to assume the burden. I cannot praise too highly admirable spirit of recuperation shown by entire community. Hollisburg is itself again and will carry on.

O. P. M. HOLLIS.

B. F. Crisler cleared his throat.

"Hollis?" he said. "Hollis? Not——"

The Governor nodded.

"Old Colonel Hollis. I thought he'd been dead for twenty years. Took quite a shock to resurrect him, but apparently it's done it. . . . However, I think I'd better go down there myself just to see that everything's going well. Like to go with me, Mr. Crisler?"

The Honorable Colfax Wimborough had read the pages of history with prudence and understanding. He recalled another occasion when a Governor had stepped in after somebody else had done the work, and uttered a few brief ringing words that had carried him to the White House. What had happened once might happen again. Since everything was going well already nothing could be lost by a personal visit to Hollisburg; if he hurried, the Governor might even persuade his constituents that the expectation of his arrival had made the waters go down.

So Mr. Crisler found a place among the secretaries and attachés and newspapermen and press agents who crowded the special car attached to the train which would reach Hollisburg at 4:56. Remembering the cheering crowd that had turned out to offer him the keys of the city, he expected that the entire surviving population would appear at the station to greet the Governor if the flood permitted.

He could see for himself as they approached the town that there was no hindrance to such a celebration. The flood was over. The bulk of the impounded waters had passed long before daylight and more actual damage had been done on the farms between Hollisburg and Adamsville than in the town

itself. Pence's Addition was coated with mud, littered with driftwood; here and there a flimsy-built frame garage had been carried away; but most of the houses were still standing, even though their windows might have been broken by floating timber and their furniture wrecked or battered by the swiftly rising waters. As the train passed through the streets of the section flooded last night, Crisler saw a hose attached to every fire plug; the mud was being washed off lawns and sidewalks and in some places the firemen already were flushing it out of houses where the water had left a coating of silt.

But the turnout at the station was small, indeed. It consisted of Colonel Hollis, the mayor, the circuit judge and Clay Sellers; and while the first three greeted the governor, Sellers led Crisler aside.

"Well, Mr. Crisler, you missed a big night."

"So it seems. I suppose the town's almost ruined."

"Ruined?" Sellers asked, amazed. "Far from it. Not more than three or four missing now, and nobody that we can't spare."

"I gathered that your spirit had been broken," Crisler explained. "The Chamber of Commerce didn't turn out to meet the Governor——"

A slow smile spread over Sellers' face.

"For the first time since it was organized," he said, "the Chamber of Commerce is givin' its main attention to commerce—doin' it, not talkin' about it. Colonel Hollis has set the Chamber to work. He's set us all to work. Everybody that was out of the flood area, practically, has been drafted to help the victims clean up. Work. Yes, sir. And what is

most astounding of all, Mr. Crisler, he's set himself to work. He hasn't slept all night and all day and he's around drivin' us all like Simon Legree. Only he tells us, 'Boys, as soon as you've cleaned off the mud and carted away the rubbish, we'll all take a day off.' "

"That doesn't sound like Hollisburg as I knew it."

"It isn't Hollisburg as anybody's known it for twenty years. Friend Crisler, the reign of Pence is over. Last night settled that."

"Is he dead?"

"No, Doc Peebles holds out the cheering prospect that he'll probably have a couple more like that before they kill him. But they'll get him some day. And that ain't exactly a happy condition, knowin' just what is goin' to get you unless an automobile runs over you first. But that's only part of Pence's misfortunes.

"I'm looked on as eccentric, friend Crisler, for my devotion to the ideas of classic antiquity. But the ancients had some sound ideas. One of 'em was that the worst of crimes was excess—having too much, being too much. If you became excessive something would get you.

"Well, Pence was too much; and he did one thing that killed him. That flood-insurance company. He had it figured to take money out of the poor suckers that bought in his Addition every way in the world; and then he piled that one on top of the rest—policies in a flood-insurance company, when we all figured there'd be no more floods. And because he figured like all the rest of us, the assets of that com-

pany were considerable below what they should have been.

"Nearly every house in Pence's Addition will have to be all done over inside. Lots of furniture smashed up, hammered around against the wall, and so on. Automobiles carried off. Oh, the damage'll run up into hundreds of thousands; but ninety per cent of it is covered by policies in Pence's company. And Pence done everything the law allowed, if not more.

"What's that? Reinsurance? No. Why should he take the trouble to do any reinsurance when there was never goin' to be another flood? I don't think there'll be any need for criminal prosecution, because Bob Mundy, as secretary of the company, applied for a receiver right off this morning and made it clear that they'd let the proper authorities settle things up. Looks as if the stockholders would have to make a pretty heavy contribution; and Pence holds ninety-eight per cent of the stock."

"You don't say so! Who's the receiver?"

"I am," said Sellers.

"Then," said Crisler, "I suppose we'll have no trouble getting our warrants. Huh! I'd forgotten we won't need one for Blades. How about his partner? The morning paper said he was missing. Did he turn up?"

"No, unfortunately, he didn't. The police are lookin' for him, though, all the way from here to St. Louis."

"Did you go ahead and get your warrants without waiting?"

"He's wanted," said Sellers cheerfully, "for as-

sault on Herb Pence with intent to kill. When Herb come to this morning he told who hit him, so my client, young Mr. Rexford, is enjoying a clear reputation at last. Yes, sir, Rufe hit Herb, and there's a general alarm out; and since a farmer up the road claims he sees Rufe turnin' off the turnpike toward the dam, shortly before she was blown up, I expect if they ketch him they'll have quite an assortment of outrages to ask him about."

"Well!" said Crisler. "You haven't left much for me to do in Hollisburg. How about Raney?"

"Raney's locked up. I took the liberty of doin' that without waitin' for you, for fear he might depart for safer climes. Apparently that's just what he was goin' to do; but luckily his curiosity got the better of him and he come downtown this morning to take a look at the wreckage. So we nabbed him."

"Then I'll wire my men in Cincinnati to go ahead on that end, and that will clean us up. Anybody running Blades' garage?"

"The committee of safety has kind of got charge of it, provisionally. Young Mr. Rexford operatin' it under a mandate from Colonel Hollis, till we find the owner."

"To think of all the trouble we expected with Blades," Crisler snorted. "Well, we can lay out the evidence——"

Sellers shook his head.

"Mr. Crisler," he said, "is there any reason why —pending the arrest of our friend Rufe—we can't leave Blades out of it?"

"I suppose not, but why should we? Of course he's dead, but——"

"But the Pences are still alive," said Sellers gravely. "Leila Pence is no great tragic figure, just an ordinary girl like any other girl; but the man she was goin' to marry has been killed, and her home's two feet deep in mud, and her father's had a stroke and is liable to be set back several hundred thousand dollars. Do you see any use disturbin' the one thing she's got left, the confidence that George Blades was a high-minded business man who lost his life just before they were goin' to start in on a dream of happiness? I don't.

"Nor, provisionally, do I see any reason why we should hang this one thing more on Pence. He's done. He'll have to get out as president of the bank, and as president of the Chamber of Commerce, too. He'll have plenty of money left but it'll take more than money to soothe the heart of St. Elmo Pence. And if you let the whole town know that the man he was goin' to take into his family and his real estate business was nothing but a crook, why—— I said some time ago that Pence was due for a visit from Nemesis. Well, he's got it. Justice has been done, good and hard. Now's the time for Christian charity. Mr. Crisler, don't rub it in."

"All right," Crisler promised. "Unless Rufe is caught and spills what he knows I'll let Blades's memory stay green. Now let's go down and talk to Raney."

"Wait a minute," said Sellers. "Take a look at this historic ceremony."

In front of half a dozen movie cameras, the Governor was shaking hands with Colonel Hollis.

XXVIII.

Financial Relief for Agriculture.

AS the Colonel had said, Hollisburg was itself again. That was something of a hardship on the strong-handed persons who had taken hold on the night of the flood and done their job so well that before the end of the week they had made themselves as superfluous as a field marshal after the war has been won. On Wednesday of the next week the committee of safety was formally disbanded, and at five o'clock the same afternoon Nick Rexford, under the committee's final order, closed Blades's garage. He locked the door and sent a boy with the keys to Herb Pence; and then he went down the street to join Ruth, who was waiting for him at the library.

"And thus ends my brief career as an independent business man," he told her.

They came out from the reading room, with its warning signs of "No Talking," and stood on the steps in the afternoon sunlight.

"And you liked it," said Ruth. "The Pences will have to rent the building for somebody else to use as a garage. Why don't you try it?"

"My ambitions run a different way," Rexford told her. "I'd still like to buy that farm." He stopped, with a sudden worry in his face.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I was just thinking," he explained, "that it's been a week since I did any manual labor. Thursday I was in jail, Friday and Saturday I was doing odd jobs for the committee, and since then I've been running this garage."

"Don't be foolish. I've seen you working the gasoline pump yourself. And nobody would disqualify you for what you did during the flood."

"Nobody ought to, but I'm afraid of the law. I'd better telegraph grandfather's executor and tell him the truth. If he says I'm ineligible I suppose I'll have to try to borrow a little money here and start up that garage again. I could probably do it, now that I'm out of jail; after all, we Phi Chis seem to hang together—in Hollisburg. But I'd rather buy the farm. Where are we going? Or does it make any difference?"

"It does to me; I have to go home and get supper for father. So you'll have to come too."

"We'll just stop at the office and tell Sellers," he said. "I suppose I revert to my chauffeur job for the next few weeks, if I'm still in line for my twenty-five thousand. Carpenter's a good fellow—the executor. He'd give me the edge in the decision if it lay with him. I suppose the courts will have to settle it, but—oh, Ruth, we'd like that farm."

"We?" she asked, looking him somberly in the eyes.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I told you last week," she said wearily. "Father did a wonderful thing here, of course. They're going to elect him president of the Chamber

of Commerce as soon as Mr. Pence resigns. But —it isn't a salaried job. And our mortgages are still going to fall due, and Mr. Pence is going to need the money, and we can't pay them."

"Now you don't mean to tell me you're going to be so unreasonably stubborn as not to let me look after that—if I can."

"I know father would never let you do it. And I'll have to stand by him."

"But," said Rexford, "on the night of the flood, when he and I were both in danger, you came to me. I know it's an old story that you'd be willing to die with people you wouldn't want to live with, but——"

"Now, Nick, I didn't mean it that way."

"I think," he told her, "that you've got yourself into a frame of mind about these mortgages. You had to brace yourself to meet the shock, and it's hard for you to unbrace, even if I'm here to be a shock absorber. But I won't argue with you on the sunny side of Main Street. If we have to hold a joint debate let's do it this evening while I'm helping you wipe the supper dishes."

"I won't let you," Ruth declared. "Wipe dishes, I mean."

"I submit to no dictation, woman, unless you're prepared to marry me."

She managed to smile at this, but they said no more till they came back to the office and found Sellers standing in the doorway, involved in clouds of pipe smoke.

"Boss," said Rexford, "I come back to your employ to-morrow. But I'm going out for supper, on

the assumption that you haven't any philosophical thoughts you want to confide in me."

"And if I had you'd be goin' out just the same, wouldn't you? Hollisburg's been too lively of late for philosophy to get much of a toe-hold, but I expect we'll have some opportunity to debate matters from now on. However, I wouldn't stand between you and your social engagements. Only there's a couple of letters here for you."

"Letters?" Rexford ran in and snatched them off the desk. For his letter to Marian Selden had been the first notice of his whereabouts which any of his old friends had had since he left New York. And if there were two letters for him, she must have spread the news.

One of them bore the address of Henry F. Carpenter. That was business—Rexford's business. Perhaps Carpenter had heard of his activities, somehow—news of the Hollisburg flood must have got into the New York papers; perhaps he had already lost his legacy. But the other letter was addressed in Marian's handwriting. And since that might contain news that would interest Ruth, he opened it first.

DEAR NICK: And after we all thought you'd jumped off the earth or cut your throat or something, wasn't it just like you to turn up again? Office boy! What kind of an office boy are you, I'd like to know? Your letter chased me up to Lenox and back again, and then when it finally arrived I had to see Mr. Carpenter and make sure I wasn't wrong before I wrote you.

Nick, you wonderful sublime idiot, where have you been keeping yourself? Don't you know Carpenter's been hunting all over the country for you ever since you disap-

peared? And why on earth were you so sudden about it? Don't you know that three days after you dropped off into the underworld or the hereafter or wherever you went they found your grandfather's real last will and testament, made down at Aiken last winter in a fit of grandfatherly affection? I think it's a perfect scream if you've been office-boying a year to get your twenty-five thousand when he split the residuary estate between you and the theological seminary——

Rexford read on to the finish—then read Carpenter's letter, which only confirmed the other.

"Ruth!" he called shakily. "Ruth!"

From the threshold, where she had been waiting silently with Sellers, she came into the office, so dim in the afternoon shadow that she didn't notice his excitement.

"Ruth," he demanded, "I want to know the truth. You've stuck by your father and you'd never let him down. I know that. But when I wanted to take some of my twenty-five thousand and pay off his mortgages you wouldn't let me. Was that to save his feelings or my money?"

"Oh, Nick, it's all mixed up, like everything else——"

"Suppose I could persuade him. Oh, I know you think I couldn't, but suppose I could. Fifteen thousand—well, say, twenty. Twenty thousand from twenty-five still leaves us five thousand to start on."

She shook her head stubbornly.

"Please don't argue, Nick. You've got your own start to make; and I won't be a millstone."

"You certainly won't," he agreed. "It seems I

can pay off those mortgages out of the coupons I didn't clip while I was on the road. We're going to have a million and a half——"

She sat down suddenly on Sellers' desk, her eyes wide open.

"Sorry to take your breath away," said Rexford. "But please don't say you're afraid of a million——"

"I'm not afraid of it—or of you. But I'd been building air castles on the old Miller place——"

"So had I," he admitted. "I never heard that it hurt a farmer to have a capital of a million and a half to work on. We'll buy the old Miller place and work it——" He paused; his face changed. "And spend our winters in New York," he finished; "if you wouldn't mind——"

"Now you know," said Ruth, "I've always wanted to see New York."

XXIX.

Colonel Hollis Acquires a Habit.

IN an office building on La Salle Street the vice president of the Associated Health Hotels Corporation was receiving his old friend B. F. Crisler.

"Well, Jim," said the investigator, "when I came around here to get some local color about sanitariums, before I went down to Hollisburg, I didn't dream how much I'd need it. They pushed me so hard before I had occasion to let 'em know about my real business that I came pretty near having to start one of the darned things to keep them quiet. Did you ever get a bottle of their terrible mineral water that I sent you? I had to do it—had to be seen doing it by the president of the Chamber of Commerce. Sorry to have bothered you with it."

"I got it," the vice president told him. "Got it and had it analyzed. Also got some opinions on it from our medical board. Frank, do you mean to tell me they simply let that stuff run away down at Hollisburg? That they don't even charge money for it?"

"Why? Is it any good?"

"Well," said Jim, "if our technical men know their business—and we wouldn't have declared an eighteen-per-cent dividend last year if they didn't—

that Hollisburg water is as good as French Lick. And their rail connections are good, the lay of the land is attractive so far as I could judge from the geographies and road maps——"

Crisler grinned.

"I can tell you a lot about that, too. I suppose I've still got a lot of figures in my trunk that I got from the Chamber of Commerce about mean temperatures and altitudes, and drainage and taxation."

"Then you'd better let me see them," Jim advised, "for it certainly looks to me like a good prospect. Town owns this well, you say? Why on earth have they never cashed in on it?"

Crisler shook his head.

"I guess the gentleman who did most of the cashing in down in Hollisburg didn't see enough in it for him. But he's through now."

"I suppose the town was pretty well ruined by the flood, wasn't it?"

"Man named Pence was pretty well ruined, but most other people were protected by their insurance policies. There's about as much money in Hollisburg as there ever was, I guess, though it's distributed a little more evenly. Why?"

"We operate each sanitarium through a local corporation," Jim explained. "Try to get a minority interest of local capital, when we can. We've found it's very useful in questions of taxation and relations with the local authorities. Very useful. I gather that this man Pence would have been ideal for president of the company, if we started up at Hollisburg; but I suppose he's down and out now."

"His prestige is pretty well demolished," Crisler agreed, "and his nerve, too, I guess. But if you need a local man to head your organization, what's the matter with Colonel Hollis?"

"The fellow that took hold at the time of the flood? I've read a lot about him. But could we get him? I got the idea that he was too much occupied."

"I think maybe we could persuade him," said Crisler. "If you like I'll write to my lawyer down there and get him to put out some feelers. Only, Jim, I've got to have your solemn oath that you really mean business. I've fooled that town once about a sanitarium and if I do it again they'll send a delegation clear up here to Chicago to lynch me."

"Of course we mean business. It's a crime to let that water go back into the ground and waste its sweetness on the desert air, when you could charge people real money for drinking it."

"It is good water," Crisler admitted, "when you get over the smell. I brought a keg of it back with me. Take a glass every night. I find it has an excellent effect on the liver."

Colonel Hollis stared across the desk at Sellers.

"Do I understand you rightly?" he demanded. "This is a real sanitarium this time? No more deception?"

"It seems to be perfectly authentic," said Sellers. "These people operate a string of fourteen of the things already, and it seems they make money."

"And," the Colonel went on after some clearing of the throat, "did I understand you to say they

offer me five thousand dollars a year as president of the company they propose to organize in Hollisburg?"

"That's what they say. Fact is, Colonel, they kind of seem to figure that since the flood you've recovered these here keys of the city Pence used to talk about. These sanitarium people want to come in, and they seem to think you can let 'em in or lock 'em out."

"Well, well! Well, well!"

The Colonel got up, clasped his hands under the tails of his Prince Albert coat, and took a turn about the room.

"Mr. Sellers, a moment that I have long foreseen has arrived—the moment when the needs of commerce, of industry, of progress if you will, would knock loudly at my door, interfering with the labors of historical scholarship to which my life has been devoted. I am confronted, sir, with a very difficult decision. Already, Mr. Sellers, my responsibilities as president of the Chamber of Commerce have made serious inroads on my time. In fact, I haven't taken up my pen to continue the history since I laid it aside on the night of the flood."

"I reckon you'd have time for writing even if you took this job."

"Not if I took it seriously, sir. And I should take it seriously. It isn't in me to be a mere figurehead. Especially, if I may say so, since mistaken ideas of commercial ethics made such progress in this community in recent years. I'd have to give close attention to my duties for fear other people might slide back into some of the late practices of

Mr. Pence. . . . Yes, sir, a very serious decision. If I accept this offer it means postponing the completion of my history for years—perhaps forever."

"Well, Colonel, of course it's up to you. That's a pretty good salary for a town like this——"

"Mr. Sellers, this is not a question of money. Not at all. Now that the flood has driven people back to residential property on the hill I sold those Whitcomb Avenue lots at a pretty good price. The old mansion and the four acres of ground represent a considerable value, too. It may be said to be the last of our family jewels, sir; and if I have pawned it, it was with the certainty of being able to redeem it eventually.

"Yes, sir. My prospective son-in-law, Mr. Rexford, when he found that I didn't propose to live with him and Ruth after their marriage, offered to take up those mortgages Pence held and advance me a little more money on the house, to be paid off from the royalties of my history. There's no doubt the book will sell—look at the success attending the far less scholarly work of H. G. Wells. . . .

"You wonder, Mr. Sellers, why I'm so free with this information about my private finances. Because, sir, I'm going to accept this offer; and I want you to understand clearly that money has nothing to do with it. I'm probably making a considerable financial sacrifice in postponing the completion of my history. But the truth is, Sellers——"

He paused and stared down at the lawyer with a fierceness that must have silenced doubt.

"The truth is that since the committee of safety was dissolved I've been a little restless. All my

life I'd supposed that I wasn't a man of action; but we had so infernally much action forced on us that night that I got in the habit. Yes, sir. It was work, but, damn it, Mr. Sellers, I find I like work. I positively love it. I'd be lonesome without it."

"If you feel that way," said Sellers, "the marriage had better be celebrated at once. I'll wire Chicago that it's all settled."

He added, as he reached for his pen: "Probably the goddess of Work would rather be an old man's darling than a young man's slave, and maybe the Colonel will be lucky enough to die before the honeymoon is over."

But these musings were silent. It was no longer safe, in Hollisburg, to speak with levity of Oliver Perry Morton Hollis.

THE END